

PARENTAL PERSPECTIVES AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES ABOUT  
SCHOOL CHOICE AND SUPPLEMENTAL EDUCATIONAL SERVICES UNDER  
NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND IN A LARGE URBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

A Dissertation

by

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## ABSTRACT

### PARENTAL PERSPECTIVES AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES ABOUT SCHOOL CHOICE AND SUPPLEMENTAL EDUCATIONAL SERVICES UNDER NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND IN A LARGE URBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

(August 2010)

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The current challenges faced by public schools are many. As a manifestation of the society they serve, these challenges may vary according to factors such as the location of the school, size, culture, student population, teacher effectiveness, district and state leadership, and community involvement and support. The challenges faced by an under-funded inner city school, for example, with low parental support and located in a high-poverty and crime-ridden area may be different from those issues affecting a predominantly White, middle class, suburban school. For some parents, the term “low-performing” urban school may evoke a different picture than the one generated by a suburban school that is described as “school of excellence” or “school of distinction.” Subsequently, some schools may be perceived, particularly by parents with school-age children, as being “better” than others.

This study explored the factors affecting parental thinking and decision making processes about school choice and supplemental educational services under No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) in the largest Title I urban elementary school in the largest

school district in a southeastern state, and which is currently identified by NCLB as a persistently “low-performing” school. This study also examined parents’ understanding of the term “low-performing” school. The following questions were used to guide this qualitative case study:

1. What factors influence parents’ perspectives and decision making processes regarding school choice as provided under No Child Left Behind (2002)?
2. What factors influence parents’ perspectives and decision making processes regarding supplemental education services under NCLB (2002)?
3. What are parents’ perspectives of the term low-performing school?

Five themes emerged as the most frequently occurring regarding choice and supplemental education services (SES) under No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002). First, all parents indicated that “belonging” at this school (e.g., feeling welcome, being greeted when they visited the school, not feeling judged because of their race or language, and being able to communicate with teachers and staff regardless of their native language) was their main reason for staying at this school. The second theme emerged as all parents agreed that they had to “do things themselves” if they wanted their child to be successful in school. Parents also held teachers accountable for ensuring that all children learned appropriately and expected teachers to communicate well with them, to be aware of their child’s progress and needs, to solve misunderstandings, and to come to school ready to inspire children. Parents in all focus groups also held other parents responsible for the success of other children as it affected the overall success of the school. The third theme emerged as a “lack of relationship between testing and learning.” Most parents questioned the purpose of standardized testing and wondered about the true value of

classroom grades and the label “low-performing.” Most parents questioned whether learning could be assessed accurately based only on a child’s marks on a bubble sheet at the end of a school year. The fourth theme, “confusing information,” emerged as most parents indicated that both the school and the school district provided difficult to understand information and procedures regarding supplemental education services. Parents also indicated that lack of transportation hindered the ability of many parents to participate in SES, and that limiting tutoring services to two subjects (i.e., reading and math) did not support all students. Parents were most frustrated about the fact that not all children attending a “low-performing” school were eligible to participate in tutoring. The fifth theme emerged as parents in all focus groups “repeatedly offered suggestions” and ideas about how to better the school. Suggestions ranged from teachers visiting other countries to better appreciate the resources available in the United States, to “copying” what other schools or districts not labeled “low-performing” are doing every year. A few parents also offered suggestions about how to better spend educational funds.

Parents unanimously rejected the label “low-performing” school because of testing results. All parents agreed that test results could be influenced by factors such as limited English proficiency. Most parents questioned how schools rated higher than J. E. McCaskill had a lower “academic” level. Most parents said that children at McCaskill Elementary were receiving a higher level of instruction than at “other” schools they knew about. Parents based this assertion based on their own research and conversations with friends and relatives.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The current challenges faced by public schools are many. As a manifestation of the society they serve, the challenges they face may vary according to factors such as the location of the school, size, culture, student population, teacher effectiveness, district and state leadership, and community involvement and support. Thus, the challenges encountered by an under-funded inner city school, for example, with low parental support and located in a high-poverty and crime-ridden area may be different from those issues affecting a predominantly White, middle class, suburban school.

Resources vary from one community to another, and every community must be able to provide the necessary resources to equip schools and to staff them with well-prepared teachers. In reality, some communities experience more difficulties than others in supporting their public schools. Thus, for some parents, the term *low-performing* urban school may evoke a different picture than suburban schools described as *school of excellence* or *school of distinction*. Consequently, some schools may be perceived, particularly by parents with school-age children, as being better than others. In an effort to expand our understanding about how parents choose their children's schools, the objective of this study is to explore the factors affecting parental perspectives and decision-making processes about school choice under No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001, §6316). Furthermore, this study aims to understand more fully why parents choose to enroll or not to enroll their children in supplemental education services (NCLB, 2001, §6316 [e]), available to eligible students who attend a persistently *low-performing* school.

Finally, in this study I intend to examine parents' understanding of the term *low-performing* school.

### *Historical Background*

During the decade 2000–2009, the general perception of some schools as better than others has become more complex. This complexity has been propelled by federal demands that school districts improve public education and by state increased accountability requirements. This public perception also has been fueled by increased accessibility to school data in school, district, and state progress reports. The information now available to the public regarding student academic growth, teacher credentials, and the performance of schools and school districts can be easily accessed electronically and is also available at any public school.

Driven by student test results, teacher performance data, graduation and dropout rates, financial accountability, research-based programs, and the availability of information to parents, public schools have worked vigorously to improve the proficiency levels of all students in science, reading, and math. Moreover, federal demands for high student academic achievement and continued school improvement have resulted in a system of choice, free of cost to the parents, for students attending persistently low-performing federally funded schools. Specifically, dissatisfied parents in these schools may transfer their children, at the expense of the school district, to a different, better-performing public school within the same district. This is referred to as the *choice* provision of NCLB (2001, §6316).



### *The Modern School Choice Movement*

Past events that have contributed to make choice a focal point of debate in the educational arena (Neild, 2005) must be examined to better understand the significance of parental school choice. The school choice debate began in the 1950s in the United States with Milton Friedman's (1955) call for educational vouchers. This well-known conservative economist proposed a plan in which government would give parents vouchers for their children's education in private schools (Dougherty & Sostre, 1992). However, Friedman's voucher plan did not attract attention for over a decade.

The evolution of the current system of choice also developed from several trends in American education that have occurred since the late 1960s. First, under pressure from White middle-class parents, our nation saw the creation of alternative schools that emerged as magnet schools in the 1970s. These schools have been characterized as an attempt by school districts to keep White students in the public schools (Dougherty & Sostre, 1992). Second, in the 1980s many parents in both the White and Black communities chose to leave their public schools (Dougherty & Sostre, 1992). This migration to private schools prompted a movement for tuition tax credits that was initiated by the Reagan administration. The school choice movement quickly became a push for private school choice for low-income families (Dougherty & Sostre, 1992). Finally, in the 1980s, other non-public organizations such as the Catholic Church joined the school choice debate. This organization quickly became fully involved and lobbied for tuition tax credits toward school choice during the 1980s and 1990s (Olson, 1991; Walsh, 1991).

In the 1990s charter schools were created and became a new option for choice schools. Charter schools have been approved by the local school district, or school board, and the district or board retains control over them (Lake & Hill, 2006). Moreover, public schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have expanded beyond the physical boundaries of a typical classroom. Using technological advances in electronic communication, some school districts now offer the latest in school choice in the form of virtual schools. These schools allow children to communicate with other students anywhere in the world from their own classroom. Variations of the virtual school or virtual classroom offer students the opportunity to take courses not being offered at their current school, to receive their education at home, or at a designated venue outside of the traditional schoolhouse setting.

The origin of the school choice movement also is founded on dissatisfaction with the system of public education. Dissatisfaction with these schools could be considered historically cyclical because some issues (e.g., teaching non-English speakers, general funding of schools, and overcrowding) have continued to be discussed with varying fervor for several decades in the United States. For example, Anyon (1997) has reminded us that the above issues were debated in the late 1800s, early 1900s, 1950s, as well as today.

At the time this study was initiated, the nation prepared for a presidential election and thus candidate debates were taking place. After listening to the political debates, one could discern that the topic of education, too, is a cyclical issue that surfaces as a national concern every four years. Candidates share their platforms on many issues as they wave the education flag during their campaigns. More often than not, they announce that the current state of public education is deficient and unacceptable, and the public listens to

their plans to fix the system. Although the challenges schools experience continue year after year, they reflect the changing political, cultural, and educational beliefs of society. For example, the public was very concerned about increased educational accountability in the 1990s. Solutions were proposed and eventually Congress passed and President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

*Principles of the No Child Left Behind Education Act of 2001*

This federal education act was designed around four basic principles: (a) stronger accountability for results, (b) freedom for states and communities, (c) proven education methods, and (d) more choices for parents (NCLB, 2001). The first principle, *stronger accountability*, required educational agencies to ensure that all students were making academic progress while documenting and informing parents of the academic performance of children, schools, school districts, and states. *Freedom for states and communities*, the second principle, allowed both state education agencies and school districts the flexibility to use federal funds to address their particular issues and needs. The third principle, *proven education methods*, required that a percentage of the federal funds received by the local education agency be used only to support education programs that are scientifically based. Finally, the fourth principle, *more choices for parents*, also known as the choice provision under NCLB (2001, §6316), stipulated that students attending a low-performing school for over 2 years may transfer within the district to a better performing school. This action would be at the expense of the local board of education, using federal funds that otherwise would support other programs.

### *Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)*

Since the enactment of No Child Left Behind (2001), public schools receiving federal funds are required to increase their student academic progress every year. If schools do not meet their goals and are deemed low performing, they face a variety of sanctions ranging from a warning to possible staff changes. The yearly academic gain that students must make is referred to in the law as adequate yearly progress (AYP). This is based on annual standardized test results in reading and math and was created to help states establish annual performance goals that meet the state curriculum. Currently, NCLB stipulates that 100% of students will be at or above grade level by 2014 (§6311). States use AYP data to track student, school, and district growth performance.

Similarly, AYP data are used to identify schools and districts that do not meet growth benchmarks. These schools are then monitored by each state's department of public instruction and the federal government. Schools that fail to make AYP for one or more consecutive years are known as persistently underperforming schools. These schools are then subject to the following sanctions according to NCLB (2001, §6316): (a) monitoring of AYP performance by the local school board and the state during the first year of not making AYP, (b) the offer of choice to parents during the second year of not making AYP, and (c) the provision of choice and supplemental education services (SES) during the third year of not making AYP. Sanctions to schools that fail to make AYP beyond the 4<sup>th</sup> year continue to include choice and SES and may include additional sanctions to the school such as plans to restructure the school by changes to curriculum, staff, and administration.

*Fiscal and Logistical Complexities of Choice and SES*

To provide adequate services to its constituents, a school district must be appropriately funded. Directly related to this issue are two major changes faced by school districts. First, industrial flight to China and other emerging manufacturing markets such as India and Brazil has modified the economic landscape of cities and towns in the United States. This economic change has reduced the ability of many cities to meet their financial responsibilities for the public schools (Kahn, 2003). Second, many public schools are in danger of not being sufficiently funded due to other national, state, and local trends affecting revenue, such as unemployment and foreclosures. Overall, public school budgets allow little room for economic changes such as these, and when they occur, school districts must end their spending. For example, given the rapid increase in oil prices over the last few years, some districts have found it difficult to operate their school buses. Increases in diesel fuel prices were not provided for in districts' budgets (Brumfield, 2005). These budget reductions also affected other areas such as textbook adoptions, new computers, and more important, personnel (Lambert, 2006).

In addition, school districts also have the logistical and fiscal responsibility of choice and supplemental education services (SES) under NCLB (2001, §§6316, 6316[e]). When parents, entitled to choice and SES, decide to send their children to a better-performing school or to enroll in SES, the district must fund these choices. These added responsibilities for choice include funding the cost of transporting students to a different attendance zone, additional books and materials at the choice school, and any other resulting changes in staff at both sending and receiving schools. Parents who enroll their children in SES do so free of cost. However, the school district does not receive

additional funding from the federal government for this purpose. The school district has to reallocate its resources to fund SES. Consequently, a school may not be able to offer SES to all students (e.g., K-5), but rather to students in grades 3 and 5, the gateway years, only. Similarly, other federally funded programs offered by the school district (e.g., Title I tutors, reading programs, summer school, summer meal program, and other Title I services) are inescapably scaled down or in some cases eliminated.

#### *Accessibility to School, District, and State Performance Results*

NCLB (2001) has improved how public schools collect, analyze, and disseminate student, district, and state performance information. Currently, the academic growth of students in reading and math, as well as other pertinent district and state information, is provided to parents in the form of public report cards. Consequently, in addition to the traditional report cards students take home at the conclusion of every grading period, students attending federally funded public schools take home a second annual report card. The latter contains student performance information in reading and math, as well as a comparison of the student's achievement level with that of the district and the state. Parents and the public also are informed of schools that are not on target to produce 100% proficient students by 2014. School rankings and overall district results are published on the district's website and in local newspapers. Moreover, school districts disseminate individual student information to parents or legal guardians only.

Schools and school districts are rated on a pass or fail system once a year based on AYP data. A school may fail to make AYP even if only one of the student subgroups present at that school fails to make the mandated yearly academic benchmark of growth. Under NCLB (2001, §6316), the subgroups are defined as 40 or more students in the

following categories: All Students, American Indian, Asian, Hispanic, Black, White, Limited English Proficient, Special Education, Migrant, and Free and Reduced Priced Lunch. A similar grading system exists at the state level. If one school district does not make AYP, the entire state is deemed a low-performing state. Similarly, if one school in the district fails to make AYP, the entire school district is deemed low performing.

The provisions of NCLB (2001) have allowed for unprecedented access to information pertaining to the academic performance of public schools. For example, in North Carolina, parents have access to their child's school information in written and electronic form. These data are organized as information about the school, the teachers, the principal, and the students' yearly academic progress by student subgroups attending each school (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2007). Similarly, the requirements of NCLB (2001, §6319) have made school districts accountable for the quality of teachers working in the public schools by requiring higher standards for all entering teachers (e.g., valid teaching license, appropriate results in content area tests, etc.). Finally, this law requires that all curriculum programs used in schools are both effective and research based.

Achieving continued growth over time is a complex challenge for students, parents, and the public schools. Factors not available on the public report card that may affect the level of growth students can achieve year to year include: the child's individual level of performance, parents' level of education, parents' support for education at home, teacher efficacy, home-school relationship, teacher-parent relationship, and language barrier. Moreover, the number of students who change schools during the school year is not reported to the public. These students may also affect school results and individual

teacher results because not all school districts within any given state share the same textbooks or pacing guides. Although curricular goals and expectations are the same in the state where this study was conducted, school districts (i.e., local education agencies) have the freedom to achieve such goals and expectations as they deem appropriate. In addition, the growing number of non-English speaking students entering public schools has increased the complex task of teaching and testing children whose first language is not English. Although language acquisition has been reported to take 3, 5, 8 or more years (Cummins, 1984), some non-English speakers are expected to participate in the state testing program 2 years after entering a U.S. school. For example, in North Carolina, non-English speaking students attending public schools are given the same standardized tests as all other students only 2 years after enrollment in U.S. schools. Moreover, students in the third and fifth grades must pass the End of Grade (EOGs) tests in reading and math to be promoted to the next grade level. In this state, similar tests are administered to students in the eighth and tenth grades. General testing results by subgroup are available to the public electronically (e.g., [www.ncreportcards.org](http://www.ncreportcards.org)).

A combination of the issues mentioned above may hinder the overall academic growth of students, schools, and school districts. For example, in August of 2006, the Michigan Department of Education reported in their website that 544 schools did not make AYP compared to 436 the previous year (Michigan Department of Education, 2006). In Georgia, the public schools reported that only 82% of the more than 2000 public schools in the state made AYP during the school year 2006-2007 (Georgia Public Schools, 2007). In North Carolina, the Department of Public Instruction reported that during the school year 2005-2006, only 1,070 schools made AYP. This means that 1,270



schools did not make AYP (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2007).

Although the above information is readily available to the public, it is not clear if or how parents access this type of information, the discussions they may have about AYP results, and how those conversations influence parental decisions.

### *Problem Statement*

For parents and schools, the issue of choice extends beyond the act of changing from one school to another, and beyond enrolling or not enrolling their children in a tutoring program. This study sought to enhance our understanding of the parental perspectives and decision-making processes regarding school choice and supplemental education services under No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 in a large urban elementary school. Little is known about what makes parents decide to switch their children from a low-performing school to a different and better-performing school. Similarly, much can be learned from parents who decide not to switch schools and to remain at their current, low-performing school.

Some researchers (Becheley, 2005; Neild, 2005; Payne, 1996) have proposed that education, ethnicity, and social class may have something to do with the decisions parents make. Neild (2005) for instance, suggested that choice may continue to be a positive alternative for those parents who have access to information about schools and who decide to capitalize on the opportunities provided by a school district. However, Fusarelli (2007) and Howell (2006) argued that even when presented with valuable information, parents may continue to do and choose what they feel is in their best interest. Bolman and Deal (1997), referring to human and organizational change, proposed that “when people don’t know what to do, they do more of what they know” (p.

6). Existing studies have reported that only a small number of parents entitled to the choice provision under NCLB have decided to enroll their children in another school (Fusarelli, 2007; Howell, 2006). According to Fusarelli, little is known about the perspective and decision-making processes of parents who chose not to transfer their children to a better-performing school, or about their dissatisfaction with the school, teachers, staff, or community. Given these gaps in our understanding, schools can benefit from learning how parents arrive at the decisions they must make.

This study may also provide schools with an opportunity to enhance parent–teacher relationships or parent–school connections. As the year 2014 approaches, a large number of school districts and states are under increased pressure to boost student achievement under NCLB (2001). Parents who chose not to transfer out of a low-performing school may provide new insights into the positive aspects that keep their children at these schools. Moreover, schools and school districts can better understand the thinking processes and deciding factors for parents who chose to transfer their student to a better-performing school, but decided to come back to a low-performing school. In addition, parents who chose to keep their children at a low-performing school may provide new perspectives of the current capabilities of the choice program within the school district.

By explaining their understanding of the term low-performing schools, parents may provide school personnel with a pragmatic definition that will help them better grasp parental decisions. Moreover, parent conversations may provide answers to social questions regarding school choice such as acceptance, belonging, ethnicity, culture, and spoken language. Similarly, do these parents really believe their school is low

performing? What constitutes a low performing school for these parents? In addition, parents who chose not to transfer their children to a different school may have a unique understanding of the education process under NCLB, and schools may benefit from learning about the value placed by parents on learning, discipline, attendance, support for the school, support for the child, and support for the teacher. Finally, because choice and supplemental education services require parents to understand and analyze school information, their insights may assist school and district leaders in preparing and publishing this information in jargon-free, clear, concise ways.

In summary, only by engaging in meaningful conversations (Wheatley, 2002) with parents, can more be learned about why parents keep students at a school deemed low-performing, or the factors that influence their change to a better-performing school. Only by talking to parents can school administrators learn what staying at a low-performing school represents to them. Such a decision could be the result of parental disinterest or inertness. On the other hand, the same outcome could be the culmination of an inquiry process conducted by parents about other schools, teachers, and administrators. Only by engaging parents in conversations can school leaders learn more about the value of changing schools from their perspective.

Specifically, this study investigated the perspectives and decision-making processes of parents who chose to stay at a low-performing school. This study also examined the thinking of parents who did not enroll their students in free supplemental education services (SES) in the form of after school tutoring. Finally, this study investigated parents' understanding of the designation *low-performing*, and whether or

not a common understanding of a low-performing school existed among participants. Specifically, the research questions that guided this case study are:

What factors influence parents' perspectives and decision-making processes regarding school choice as provided under No Child Left Behind Act of 2001?

What factors influence parents' perspectives and decision-making processes regarding supplemental education services under No Child Left Behind Act of 2001?

What are parents' perspectives of the term low-performing school?

#### *Definition of Terms*

**No Child Left Behind.** The education act known as No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 or NCLB was signed into law in 2002. NCLB is described by the United States Department of Education as the reauthorization of the Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The ESEA is built on the principles of accountability for results, choice for parents, greater local accountability, and research based strategies (NCLB, 2001).

**Adequate Yearly Progress.** Mandated by NCLB (2001), this expectation of academic growth is defined as an individual state's yearly measure of progress toward the goal of 100 percent of students achieving 100 percent proficiency in state academic standards in at least reading/language arts and math by the year 2014. School districts monitor school and student progress yearly using academic benchmarks. Students attending persistently low achieving schools as determined by AYP results may transfer their students to a better performing school or may be eligible to receive free tutoring services (NCLB, 2001).

**Choice.** If a child attends a persistently low-performing school, "parents can choose to send the child to another public school that is not so identified"

(www.ed.gov). When students are entitled to choice, the school district is responsible for transportation costs.

Supplemental Education Services. Children who attend a federally funded school that has been identified as a persistently low performing school for 2 consecutive years may be eligible to receive Supplemental Education Services or SES in the form of tutoring in reading and math (www.ed.gov). The term SES referring to *socio economic status* was not used in this study.

Low-Performing School. A school that has not achieved Adequate Yearly Progress for 2 or more consecutive years.

Better-Performing School. A school that is performing academically at a higher level than a low performing school. A better performing school is an option to parents entitled to transfer their children under the choice provision of NCLB (2001, §6316 [e]).

Report cards. This term has a dual definition in this study. First, a report card is the traditional and commonly known document where a student's scores are reported by the child's teachers and sent home by the child's school regularly during the school year. The second definition of a report cards used in this study is the document published by the school district annually. This type of report card contains a comparison of student's results vs. school, district, and state performance averages.

### *Organization of Study*

Chapter 1 addresses major issues present in many American schools today: parental choice of schools, enrollment in supplemental educational services (SES), and parental understanding of the term low performing as provided by NCLB (2001,). This chapter provides a historical background of choice since the 1950s, and introduces the

research regarding choice and SES. A rationale for exploring parents' perspectives and decision-making process regarding school choice under No Child Left Behind in a large urban elementary school is also put forth in this chapter, as well as the benefits, definition of terms, and general guiding questions.

Chapter 2 presents a review of literature pertinent to school choice and supplemental education services under No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. This chapter also explores the existing literature in the area of satisfaction with school choice, participation in school choice and supplemental education services, and parental decision-making processes. This chapter ends with a discussion of the most recent developments regarding NCLB for states and schools, as well as its reauthorization process.

Chapter 3 describes the method of research followed in answering the research questions. This chapter also describes the participants, data collection, and analysis methods. Research questions guiding the study are presented in this chapter. A description of the author as a member of the administrative team of this school and as the researcher is provided in this chapter.

Chapter 4 reports the findings. An analysis of the major themes and key findings that emerged from the data is presented in this chapter.

Chapter 5 offers a discussion of the findings of this research. It also examines the implications of this research, its limitations, and recommendations for future investigations. An epilogue is included at the conclusion of this chapter.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The following review of literature explored the parental perspectives and decision-making processes related to school choice and supplemental educational services under No Child Left Behind (2001). This chapter examined the background of school choice, and the current practices among parents, particularly in low-performing schools, related to participation in choice and free supplemental educational services (SES).

As discussed in Chapter 1, choice and SES are services offered to parents because of sanctions to a school that has been identified by the federal government as being low performing for at least 2 consecutive years. All parents of children enrolled in this type of school must be given the option to transfer to a better performing school. However, only students who meet the federal guidelines for the economically disadvantaged criteria of NCLB (2001, §6316 [e]) qualify for supplemental educational services, most often in the form of after school tutoring lessons. These school sanctions are provided at the expense of the district, free of cost to parents. They also include transportation to the school parents have chosen.

#### *Historical Aspect of School Choice*

School choice is not a new concept. Societies have had the opportunity to train their young in a variety of ways to meet their needs for centuries. Throughout history, individuals with higher status or sufficient financial means have had choices (e.g., private schools) about how and where their children were educated. The historical aspect of

school choice for the purpose of this review of literature will be limited to what Dougherty and Sostre (1992) called the “current idea of school choice” (p. 162). Therefore, this review of literature begins with events that have influenced the choice movement since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Dougherty and Sostre (1992) reported that the current school choice movement in America first appeared in the mid-1950s when the conservative economist, Milton Friedman, proposed a plan for government to give parents vouchers for their children’s education in private schools. They reported that “...although [the voucher plan] attracted some attention in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it failed to ignite any major interest until recently” (p. 161). Contemporary voucher advocates include political leaders from both political parties who represent all ethnic groups regardless of socio economic status (Metcalf & Tait, 1999). However, vouchers continue to be a topic of controversy for some for two main reasons. First, public monies are used to fund education provided by some religious schools (Rayton, 1999). Second, as recently as 2007, publications such as *The Economist* continued to report that, “few ideas are more controversial than vouchers” because of the expense to taxpayers (“Free to Choose”, 2007, p.1). However, *The Economist* reported that voucher programs that use a lottery have been successful in this country and around the world.

#### *Vouchers and Magnet Schools*

The evolution of the current system of school choice is also the result of several trends in American education that have occurred since the late 1960s. One of them was the call for educational change by conservatives in the 1970s. These proponents advocated the implementation of a system of vouchers redeemable for educational



services in private schools. Another trend occurred under pressure from White, middle-class parents who wanted the creation of alternative schools. These schools were publicly maintained schools located within a school district that emerged as magnet schools in the 1970s (Dougherty & Sostre, 1992). As the name suggests, these magnet schools were thought to attract academically gifted students to accelerated programs in different subject areas including the arts, academics, or foreign languages. Magnet programs have been characterized as an attempt by school districts to provide parents with more choices, in selected schools, to keep White parents in the public schools (Dougherty & Sostre, 1992). A growing number of Black parents eventually joined their White counterparts either in leaving public schools or in demanding school choice for their children. At the core of this movement were the parents, who, regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic status, were dissatisfied with the way schools were being managed and sought other places to educate their children (Dougherty & Sostre, 1992).

Dougherty and Sostre (1992) argued that the current school choice movement was made possible only after “liberal policy makers, urban educators, White and Black parents, and state governors” (p. 161) introduced school choice plans in the 1980s. These researchers warned that the choice movement also was “vulnerable to reverse” (p.161) because of the division among its proponents, some of whom advocated for choice within public schools only, and others who supported private school choice.

### *Private Schools*

For many parents, the choice measures instituted in the 1970s and 1980s did not come quickly enough. Many parents in both the White and Black communities chose to leave their public school at the end of the 1980s to educate their children in private

schools. For example, an increase in enrollment in all White schools and the creation and expansion of all Black and Afro-centric schools began during this time. Walsh (1991) reported that some parents drove long distances every day past other public and private schools to attend an all Black school. Moreover, parents reported that overcrowding in public schools and dissatisfaction with their programs and treatment of students were reason enough to drive 40 miles each day (Walsh, 1991).

The public migration to private schools in the late 1970s and early 1980s prompted a movement for tuition tax credits initiated by the Reagan administration and supported by the first Bush administration (Dougherty & Sostre, 1992). Although this movement to create tuition tax credits failed, conservatives quickly realized they had to “repackage school choice in a form that its opponents might find more palatable or at least harder to oppose” (Dougherty & Sostre, p. 164). Thus, both the Reagan and Bush administrations modified their requests, and the school choice movement became a push for private school choice for low-income families.

### *Catholic Schools*

The Catholic Church also joined the school choice debate in the 1980s. This organization quickly mobilized and rapidly assumed an influential and supportive position of school choice (Dougherty & Sostre, 1992). During the late 1980s and the early 1990s the Catholic Church became fully involved in the choice debate and lobbied for tuition tax credits toward school choice in non-public Catholic schools (Olson, 1991; Walsh, 1991). In fact, during national discussions about choice in 1991, representatives from the Catholic Church met with the first President Bush to advocate the inclusion of their private schools and reportedly walked away with a positive response from the

President (Olson, 1991). Subsequently, the Catholic Church allocated \$2 million dollars to, “set up a national office to guide state and diocesan groups on the issue of choice and to establish a national Catholic parents’ organization to lobby on the issue” (Dougherty & Sostre, 1992, p. 169). The Catholic Church had more to gain from choice than broadening the educational future of its students. The Church also stood to benefit financially from government vouchers for education (Walsh, 1991).

Although some parents took advantage of a variety of opportunities (e.g., tuition tax breaks, vouchers, and a limited number of spaces for minority children in private schools) to enroll their children in private schools (Olson, 1990), the evolution of the current idea of school choice over the last 60 years is significantly political and complex (Dougherty & Sostre, 1992). Many parents who were not able to afford private schooling for their children, or who remained loyal to their school and school district became advocates of the school choice movement within their district (Olson, 1990). It could be said that these parents had hoped for what Dougherty and Sostre (1992) called, “an approximation of private schooling within the public schools” (p. 9).

### *Charter Schools*

The 1990s saw the creation of charter schools as a new type of choice. These schools are approved by the local school district or school board and have been defined by Lake and Hill (2006) as “...public schools of choice” (p. 7). However, the local board of education retains control over these schools. Thus, charter schools receive public funds based on the number of children who attend, and schools that do not attract enough students to pay their bills must close (Lake & Hill, 2006). According to the 2005 National Governors’ Association Report, charter schools have the “...flexibility to respond to

student needs in innovative ways and serve as laboratories for new approaches. To the extent charter schools compete with traditional district schools for students, they can also provide an incentive for other schools to improve” (NGAR, 2005, p. 8). During the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, teachers and administrators have continued to question the value of charter schools based on tests results and racial balance within these schools. Some also have called for a cap on the number of charter schools that a state can operate. Opponents of charter schools have argued that the cost to tax payers is not justifiable based on academic performance. Charter schools, like regular public schools, are subject to public scrutiny and receive performance labels. Opponents of charter schools have reported that 6 of the 10 worst schools in one southeastern state are charter schools (North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research [NCCPPR], 2002).

### *Choice Today*

This review of the literature located two realities about parental dissatisfaction with public school and the choice policy. First, dissatisfaction with public schools has grown among parents of all ethnic backgrounds since the mid 1950s. Second, no change policy, such as school choice under NCLB (2001, §6316), can survive without the support of the political structure of any given geographical area. In 1986, The National Governors’ Association supported the latter point when they declared that parents were limited in their school choice. The association recommended that parents be allowed to choose the best public school for their children (Dougherty & Sostre, 1992). Echoing this position, the first President Bush a few years later declared:

We can encourage educational excellence by encouraging parental choice. The concept of choice draws its fundamental strength from the principle at the very

heart of the democratic idea. Every adult American has the right to vote, the right to decide where to work, where to live. It's time parents were free to choose the schools that their children attend. This approach will create the competitive climate that stimulates excellence in our private and parochial schools as well.

(“America 2000”, p. 5)

Twenty years after the 1986 Governors’ report, the issues of choice continued to be discussed. For example, the 2005 report from the National Governors’ Association confirmed that school choice in the United States had expanded. This report indicated that states and school districts provided more educational options than at any other time in history. However, the report also noted that some schooling options were limited to larger or urban school districts.

#### *Educational Alternatives*

School choice today includes magnet schools (e.g., International Baccalaureate programs), charter schools, bilingual schools, virtual schools, neighborhood schools, and specialized schools (e.g., foreign language, arts, and technology) from Kindergarten through 12th grade. Although it would seem that parents have many options, the 2005 National Governors’ Association report stated that, “Many governors and state policy leaders are concerned that the current supply of schools is not successfully educating all students to meet achievement goals set by the state” (p. 7). This concern came 10 years after Matthews and Hansen (1995) published a study in support of school choice as a way to improve students, schools, and society. They wrote:

John Chubb noted that the real issue of choice was not about choice *per se*, but about district and school organization. Real choice means that school will be

reorganized to allow student learning and professional teaching to occur in a maximized condition. (p. 70)

This review of the literature revealed that the current school choice movement has been several decades in the making and that choice has become more readily available to parents. Similarly, some researchers have suggested that school improvement due to competition, as a parallel expectation of choice may not be occurring as fast and widespread as originally expected by the proponents of school choice movement (Matthews & Hansen, 1995).

#### *No Child Left Behind Education Act of 2001*

A historical investigation of the current (Dougherty & Sostre, 1992) idea of school choice also must include the provision of choice under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001). With the enactment of NCLB in 2002, school choice in the United States was optimized. This act contained several provisions designed to improve education and was organized around four basic principles: (a) stronger accountability for results, (b) freedom for states and communities, (c) proven education methods, and (d) more choices for parents.

First, stronger accountability for results required education agencies to ensure that all students would make academic progress. It also required states and districts to document the academic progress of every student and to inform parents of the academic performance of all students and schools within their district. Parents are provided yearly state report cards that contain student, school, district, and state information about academic performance. The second principle, freedom for states and communities, allowed both state education agencies and school districts the flexibility to use federal

funds to address their particular issues and needs to improve academic performance. Although states have the flexibility to utilize federal funds to address their particular needs, the third principle, proven educational methods, required that a percentage of the federal funds received by the local education agency be used only to support education programs that are scientifically based. For example, NCLB (2001) has supported the elementary and pre-elementary reading programs called Reading First and Early Reading First (§6361-6376) . Finally, the fourth principle of NCLB (2001), more choices for parents, stipulated that students attending a school that has been deemed low performing for 2 years may transfer within the district to a better performing school within the district at the expense of the local board (§6316). The fourth principle also entitled students of low-income parents to receive supplemental educational services (SES) such as tutoring, after-school services and summer school if they attended a persistently underperforming school (§6316 [e]).

Thus, choice and SES are sanctions applied to a school deemed low performing. Although all parents are entitled to choice under NCLB (2001, §6316) if their school underperforms for 2 consecutive years, only economically disadvantaged children are entitled to SES if the school continues to underperform for a third year (§6316 [e]). All students attending a federally funded and persistently dangerous school or who have been victims of a violent crime while in school may transfer to a safer, better school within their district at the expense of the district (NCLB, 2001, §6316).

The No Child Left Behind Education Act of 2001 represented the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The original ESEA (1965) was created during the Johnson administration as part of that

administration's war on poverty initiative. Revisions to NCLB are currently being considered. These revisions began in 2007 when a bipartisan commission named The Commission on No Child Left Behind was established by George W. Bush to evaluate the 2002 law. The timeline for reauthorization and the final extent of the new law remain uncertain. However, as the revision of NCLB began, Congress is gathering information from a variety of sources including the recommendations made by The Commission on No Child Left Behind. One of the recommendations by this commission focuses on changing when parents would be able to access choice and supplemental educational services (CNCLB, ). Under the current law, parents are entitled to transfer out of a low-performing school before they can receive supplemental educational services 1 year later (NCLB, 2001, §6316, §6316 [e]).

A grant program enacted by the current administration called Race to the Top, described by President Obama as a national competition among states to improve our schools may provide an indication of the future direction of No Child Left Behind. The components of Race to the Top require states to: (a) design and implement rigorous standards and high-quality assessments, (b) attract and keep great teachers and leaders, (c) use data to inform decisions and improve instruction, (d) use innovating and effective approaches to turn-around struggling schools, and (e) demonstrate and sustain education reform (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html>). Some have already expressed concern that using innovating and effective approaches to turn-around schools (Kaye, 2010) will result in more incidents of mass-firings of teachers and principals, such as those implemented at a high school in Rhode Island. The district fired the principal, three assistant principals, and 77 teachers in February 2010 (Kaye, 2010).



### *Parental Decision Making*

Parental decision-making is an essential component of school choice and SES. Although parents have more educational opportunities today than at any other time in history, some educators have argued that without adequate and timely information, parental decision making regarding education is significantly diminished (Fusarelli, 2007). Factors such as the amount of information available to parents, their desire and ability to evaluate educational alternatives, and their ability to predict long and short term gains for their children may significantly influence the decision making process related to school choice (Neild, 2005).

#### *Multiple Factors of Parental Decisions*

Many parents' decisions about what is in the best interest of children are often the results of a compromise among factors such as: affordability, accessibility, reliability, and safety. For example, in a case study that investigated how the staff of three schools in a small town in England responded to parental choice and competition, Woods (1992) reported that parents' decisions had commonalities. Parents and school staff interviewed during Woods' study favored schools that were closer to their home, had a good reputation, and that resulted in their children being happy.

Although accessibility in the form of cost or distance may limit access to certain schools, parents today may choose to send their children to a variety of schools including: faith-based, independent, public, charter, magnet, and virtual. Regardless of the parents' final decision about schooling, Neild (2005) reported that "...school choice has moved to center stage in the American education landscape" (p. 272), arguably, due to the push for

increased student performance and district accountability under No Child Left Behind (2002).

With the enactment of NCLB (2001), many parents are faced with the decision of staying in a familiar low-performing school, or transferring their children to an unfamiliar better performing school. Some public school parents whose children are currently enrolled in a persistently low-performing school are faced with an additional choice regarding whether to enroll their children in supplemental education services (SES).

### *Timely Information*

One of the basic criticisms of the NCLB's (2001) choice provision centered on states and school districts who fail to disseminate choice information to parents in a timely manner (Fusarelli, 2007). Information about choice may reach parents immediately before the new school year begins, thus creating a problem for parents who have solidified before or after-school childcare plans, transportation routes, and daycare locations. This lack of available information for parents was considered by Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan (2007) to be a determining factor in how parents chose schools. Citing a 2005 study by Hendrie, Fusarelli (2007) wrote, "Because of testing schedules, AYP determinations are usually made in the summer or fall, yet NCLB requires that parents be notified about transfer options prior to the beginning of the school year" (p. 133). Fusarelli (2007) was very critical of state agencies, school districts, and schools that failed to make information available to parents in a timely manner. However, in one of his earlier studies, Fusarelli (2004) placed the responsibility of not leaving a low-performing school solely on the parents.

A key aspect of parental perspectives and decision-making processes about school choice and supplemental educational services was reported in a study of how 800 low to moderate-income urban parents gathered information about school choice (Teske et al., 2007). Using data generated from a survey, the authors found that the amount of information available to parents influenced their school choice decisions. Similarly, Fusarelli (2007) in an article about district progress, resistance, and obstacles to choice and supplemental education services, identified lack of information as a possible reason for low parental participation. He suggested that timely school information must be available to parents and argued that parental decision making about schools was jeopardized or hindered without it. However, Fusarelli (2007) also found that even when parents were well informed about the low performance of their current school, many parents chose to stay at low-performing school. He suggested that if parents whose children attended a persistently low-performing school decided at once to exercise choice, the district would face a serious challenge trying to accommodate and transport those students. This is a challenge that many school districts, particularly large school districts, could face because they have more than one school under sanctions from NCLB (Fusarelli, 2007).

Howell (2006), in a study about parental initial interest in school choice and NCLB, surveyed 1,000 parents during the summer of 2003 via random-digit phone dial. This study focused on the opinions of parents with children in one of the 10 largest school districts in Massachusetts. Howell found that a parent's initial interests in school options, such as vouchers, and charter or magnet schools, were not predictors of the parent's final choice. He argued that this was more evident for parents and students in

smaller and more restricted school systems (i.e., those with fewer choice options within the district). Howell also reported that: “Whether [the] parents will take advantage of [NCLB] options, and whether they can adequately assess the best needs of their children when doing so, remain open questions” (p. 142).

As Howell (2006) and Fusarelli (2007) have reported, understanding and/or predicting the educational choices parents will make is not an easy task. Yet, some parents may be more involved and better prepared than others to participate in the decision making process affecting their children’s education (Archibald, 2000; Teske et al., 2007). To examine these issues, Neild (2005) conducted a case study in which she interviewed 19 low-income parents to explore how they gathered information about high school choice, and how some of them applied to other schools. She suggested that: “Middle-class parents may be better positioned to shepherd their children through school difficulties because of their greater formal education, more sophisticated information about the schools, and greater confidence in confronting school authorities” (p. 274). Neild (2005) also suggested that parent networks facilitated the information gathering and exchange process for some parents more than others. For example, low-income parent networks tended to be dominated by kin with “little insider information” (p. 275). Conversely, middle-class networks were stronger and forged over social time during or after school. She argued that middle-class parents used their social time for “giving and getting inside information about their school” (p. 274). In general, the findings of Neild’s (2005) study also supported earlier indications (Archibald, 2000; Teske et al., 2007) that some parents may be better prepared to participate in the decision making process regarding their child’s education.

According to Payne (1996), people who live in poverty will manifest specific behaviors in their thinking, decision-making, and survival skills, and actions until someone from a higher class teaches them differently. Payne (1996) argued that it is not enough to be shown the ways of a higher social class (e.g., behavior, values, and decisions), but rather, individuals have to personally and mentally accept this new environment (e.g., language, resources, values, and means). Payne further indicated that unless the persons remove themselves from such environment, their previous behaviors would continue to exist. If her argument holds, then Payne, like Neild (2005), may have suggested that social class and education are possible determinants of better decision making.

In contrast, in a survey of how 800 low to moderate income parents in the United States choose schools, Teske et al., (2007) reported that higher socio-economic status parents "...make choices that they find satisfactory, not choices that are maximal in terms of the perceived academic gain of the options available to them" (p. 11). Their findings suggested that parents made decisions that they found beneficial to them, regardless of socio economic status. They also reported that low-income parents preferred to stay closer to home, had less accessibility to information, and relied more on information provided by the school and meetings with counselors. Like those of Neild (2005), their findings also indicated that both high and low-income parents choose one school over another for different reasons. These reasons or attributes may be influenced by the parents' level of education and by what is considered appealing to them based on both experience and education.

Neild (2005) also emphasized the concept of parenting, which, she suggested, could be considered the most important component of successful schooling. In her study, she cited Furstenberg and colleagues (1999) who stated:

Although the typical conception of parenting processes has focused on the private relationship between parent and child, parents also contribute to their children's well-being by managing the external world; that is, although parent management may involve in-home activities such as screening the individuals who enter the child's life and regulating and monitoring daily routines such as homework completion and bedtime, it may also encompass strenuous efforts to find suitable schooling for the child or productive activities to occupy non-school hours.

Capable parent management may be especially important in central city areas where resources are thin and the potential for trouble is great. (p. 273)

### *Dissatisfaction with Schools*

As mentioned earlier, school choice emerged from the mind of the conservative economist Milton Friedman in the mid-1950s (Dougherty & Sostre, 1992). Friedman's criticism of how public schools were run in what he called a "nationalized industry" (p.) prompted his call for an educational voucher system. Friedman's voucher plan did not immediately materialize, however the literature indicated that other choice movements may have emerged directly from it. Alternative schools, magnet schools, charter schools, religious schools, and conservative and liberal political agendas have contributed to the historical evolution of the current idea of choice since the mid-1950s. Therefore, since the late 1990s, researchers such as Powers and Cookson (1999) have documented both the dissatisfaction felt by parents at one school, and the satisfaction experienced as they

moved their children to a different institution. In an article focusing on the evolution of school choice within its larger political context (e.g., vouchers, charter schools), Powers and Cookson (1999) reported that, “Choice parents tend to be more involved in their children’s education than nonchoosers” (p. 111). Similarly, they reported that, “choice parents tend to be more satisfied with the educational experience offered their children...[and] choice parents tend to be dissatisfied with the public schools” (p. 111). It is worth noting that Powers and Cookson’s (1999) work pre-dates the choice provision under No Child Left Behind (2001).

In a study of parents who applied to participate in the voucher program from the Milwaukee Parental School Choice Program (MPCP), Manna (2002) surveyed parents about various aspects of the choice program and their child’s current school. Manna investigated the signals parents send when they chose to leave a school and his findings supported the findings of Powers and Cookson (1999). Both studies suggested that although any signals given by parents can be “ambiguous and difficult to interpret” (Manna, 2002, p. 426), parents involved in choice are more satisfied with their new schools. Although the findings reported by Teske et al. (2007), Manna (2002), and Powers and Cookson (1999) indicated that choice parents were happier with their choice, at their new school, and that choice parents were more involved than non-choice parents, a recent evaluation of the school choice and supplemental education services provisions of NCLB (2001, §6316, §6316 [e]) conducted by Fusarelli (2007), revealed that choice parents represented a very small percentage of the total number of parents entitled to choice under NCLB.

### *Summary*

This review of the literature indicated that only a small percentage of families take advantage of the choice provision under No Child Left Behind (Fusarelli, 2007; Teske et al., 2007; Howell, 2006; National Governors' Association, 2005). This review also indicated that, "little is known about what actually happens in parents' everyday world as they choose schools" (Becheley, 2005, p. 268). Although, as this review of the literature indicated, researchers are currently not aware of the factors that affect parental thinking and decision making processes regarding school choice and supplemental education services, Fusarelli (2007) found that an inexplicably high number of parents "...will not exercise their choice options, even given realistic options" (p. 136). He added, "...of course, not moving students from low-performing schools is also a choice" (p. 136). Education observers Bolman and Deal (1997), in their work about how people can change an organization, may have summed up this type of phenomena when they wrote: "People do more of what they know when they don't know what else to do" (p. 64).

This review also suggested that the reasons found by some researchers to explain low participation in choice are varied. For example, Fusarelli (2007) suggested that the amount of timely information provided to the parents influenced their ability to choose another school. Other researchers suggested that choice was influenced by parent educational and socio-economic levels. According to Neild, (2005), parents who were better educated were also better prepared to look for additional educational information and to deal with bureaucratic obstacles. Similarly, Powers and Cookson (1999) suggested that parents who chose to leave their school, regardless of socio-economic status, were



better educated and had smaller families. In addition, Manna (2002) also found that parents considered the discipline in the school and their relationship with the school principal as two additional determinant factors in choosing to leave their school.

Finally, this review of the literature revealed three findings related to the current perspectives and practices of parents related to school choice. First, regardless of the sponsoring party or organization, the discussions about school choice over the last 5 decades have supported parents in their search for a variety of educational alternatives for their children. Second, supporters of choice continue to believe that both the quality of education and the schools will improve due to the competition generated by choice. And, third, that further research is necessary to learn why so few parents take advantage of the choice provisions under No Child Left Behind.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The review of literature presented in Chapter 2 confirmed the need for information that expands the understanding of how parents make educational choices for their children. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to examine the factors that influence parental decision making on the issue of school choice and free supplemental education services (SES) provided in No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001, §6316, §6316 [e]). This study also examined the circumstances surrounding the low student transfer rate from a low-performing school to a better-performing school and the low enrollment rates in free student supplemental education services (tutoring). It also investigated parental understanding of the term low-performing school.

#### *Research Questions*

In addition to the findings of the review of the literature, the history of the school, student academic performance, and demographics were considered in the development of the questions that guided this study. These questions were formulated based on the current literature on parental decision making about school choice. In addition, choice theory (Glasser, 1984) was used as a framework for analyzing parental thinking and decision-making processes about school choice because the five genetically driven needs of this framework (i.e., need to survive, to belong, to gain power, to be free, and to have fun) have been identified as possible factors influencing parental perspectives and decision making about school choice by other researchers (Fusarelli, 2007; Howell, 2006; Teske et al., 2007).

This study examined the following questions regarding parental perspectives and decision-making processes about school choice and supplemental education services in a large urban elementary school:

1. What factors influence parents' perspectives and decision-making processes regarding school choice as provided under No Child Left Behind (2001, §6316)?
2. What factors influence parents' perspectives and decision-making processes regarding supplemental education services under NCLB (2001, §6316 [e])?
3. What are parents' perspectives of the term low-performing school?

*Institutional Review Board*

This study was approved by the Appalachian State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB was provided a description of the study, intended participants, expected outcomes, and the location of the study. This study focused on interviewing only parents. No students were interviewed at any time. This study also was approved by the school district and by the principal of J. E. McCaskill Elementary School. After the invitations to participate were sent home to parents, this researcher explained the *Informed Consent for Participants in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects* form to every responding parent. During this process, the researcher explained in both Spanish and English, as necessary, the purpose of this study, procedures, risks, benefits, extent of anonymity and confidentiality, compensation, and freedom to withdraw. This researcher also explained the approval form from the university and contact information for the IRB administrator and the dissertation chair. All approved forms are on file at the University and in my personal files.

### *Research Design*

In this study I wanted to engage in simple yet meaningful conversations (Wheatley, 2002) with parents to learn about their experiences, perspectives, and decision-making processes regarding choice and supplemental education services, and their understanding of the term low performing. Therefore, I used a qualitative research method to understand this “social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved” (Glesne, 2006, p. 4). The questions guiding this study did not lend themselves to a quantitative approach because my intention here was not that of, “making generalizations about some social phenomena” (Glesne, 2006, p. 4). Rather, I wanted to explore the perspectives and decision of a group of parents as they grappled with the educational options presented by No Child Left Behind (2001).

Furthermore, I used a qualitative approach because this study also examined a free tutoring program, Supplemental Education Services, which focuses primarily with parents, teachers, students, and the community. Such a program has to construct a world of timely information and opportunities that affects hundreds of families of diverse backgrounds and languages. This new world exists within a school, and it can only successfully function because of detailed planning and personal interaction among stakeholders where communication, conversations, responses, and reflections are the norm. If such a socially constructed world is to be better understood, a qualitative approach would also provide a closer understanding to the multiple perspectives of the people involved (Glesne, 2006).

Moreover, I decided to conduct a case study because my interest was more aligned with learning about the current factors affecting parental thinking and decision-

making processes regarding choice and SES, than to streamline a set of school sanctions mandated by the federal government on a low-performing school. Aiming to gain the most “insight into an issue” an *instrumental* case study seemed to match the purpose of my research (Stake, 2000, p. 437). However, the purpose and type of this study were most aligned with what Stake (2000) calls a *collective* case study because it allowed me to “investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition” (p. 437) from a qualitative perspective.

Single-site unstructured ethnographic data (Maxwell, 2005) were collected through focus group interviews, survey responses, document and artifact reviews, and site and participant observations. All interviews were conducted by this researcher. Two focus group interviews were conducted in Spanish and two were conducted in English. Similarly, all document translations and transcriptions were completed by this researcher. The contributions of participants are protected by anonymity. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity and perspectives of all participants and the name of the school. When appropriate, direct quotes from participants were used and were indicated by quotation marks. Occasionally, participants were quoted in Spanish to guard against the meaning of their comments being lost in the translation. Their original expression in the Spanish language was followed by a translation to English.

#### *Site Selection*

As a graduate student in a doctoral program in educational leadership at a well-established university in the southeast, I had the opportunity to reflect on what I wanted to learn from this graduate school endeavor. I knew early on that I wanted to interact with minority parents, particularly Latino parents, perhaps because I was born and raised in

Mexico until the age of 21. However, a major concern about conducting this study was to avoid what Glesne (2006) called “backyard research” for all the possible ethical and political dilemmas she warned against (p. 32).

As I began to narrow my focus, I studied the possibility of conducting the study at a Title I elementary school in a small semi-rural school district. My friend and colleague, W. A. Murray, was a school administrator at that school, and it appeared to be a possible research site. In addition, this school had been recently notified of its sanctions and school choice due to its low-performing status under NCLB. These plans, however, did not materialize.

As I explored other possible research sites, one thought in particular guided me. In a discussion about site and participant selection, Miles and Huberman (as cited in Maxwell, 2005) stated:

Remember that you are not only sampling *people*, but also *settings, events, and processes*. It is important to line up these parameters with the research questions as well, and to consider whether your choices are doing a representative, time efficient job of answering them. (p. 87)

Further understanding of what I wanted to gain from this study led me to take a second look at my own school. With the support of my dissertation committee, and with the approval of the school district authorities, the school where I was employed at the time as an assistant principal was selected as the site for this study. However, as suggested by Glesne (2006), I did prepare to conduct my study in my school, “with heightened consciousness of potential difficulties. Because of the apparent ease involved in accessing and talking with people [I] already [knew]...” (p. 33).

### *Profile of the Research Site*

This site was the largest Title I elementary school in the largest school district of a southeastern state with almost a thousand students enrolled in grades K through 5. This one floor building was located approximately 9 miles from the center of the city and a few blocks from a notorious intersection that was marked by crime and accidents. The school opened its doors in the late 1960s and the surrounding neighborhood reflected typical homes from that decade and the next. Originally a predominantly White middle class section of the city, the community surrounding J. E. McCaskill Elementary School had experienced a change in population over the last 20 years, but more so in the last 5 years. According to school data available to the public, the student demographics reflected this change: 72.4% of students are economically disadvantaged, 50% Black, 40% Hispanic, 5% White, 5% other including Asian and Native American. Due to its academic performance, this school had been designated by the federal government as a persistently low-performing school (NCLB, 2001), and the school district considered it as a priority school (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2009).

### *Participant Selection*

“Qualitative researchers neither work (usually) with populations large enough to make random sampling meaningful, nor is their purpose that of producing generalizations” (Glesne, 2006, p. 34). With this in mind, I approached the process of participant selection for this study committed only to my original idea of engaging in meaningful conversations with diverse parents (Wheatley, 2009) about their thinking and decision-making processes related to school choice and supplemental education services under No Child Left Behind (2001). Because I was the assistant principal at the research

site at the time of this study, I caution the reader that occasionally, reference to the research site is as *my* school, *our* school, or *the* school.

### *Selection Strategy*

The 22 participants in this study were representative of the diverse ethnic makeup of the school. Therefore, parents in this study were predominantly Black (6) or Hispanic (13). A limited number of White parents (3) also participated in this study. Not all participants selected for this study participated in the federal lunch program, and therefore, some were not eligible to receive supplemental education services. However, these parents' perspectives were equally important to the study because they were eligible for choice. Maximum variation sampling was used as the selection strategy for this study (Glesne, 2006).

Three hundred and eighty-four students in grades 3 through 5 formed the pool of participants. The ethnic makeup of these 384 students was as follows: 39.32% of the students were designated as Hispanic and 52.34% were Black. White students accounted for less than 7% of the entire population and 3% were designated as other (i.e., Asian, Multi-racial, Native American). With the exception of *Other*, the ethnic designations used here were those used by the federal government (NCLB, 2001) and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Finally, of the 384 students, 87.76% were economically disadvantaged and were entitled to free tutoring. Accounting for siblings within this group of students, and only having considered students who were in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade or 5<sup>th</sup> grade 330 invitations were sent home in Spanish and English (see Appendices A and B). The invitations were sent home with students in sealed plain white envelopes on plain paper. No school stationary was used.



Teachers in Grades 3 and 5 were given the invitations and instructed to give each child in their room an invitation to take home. Teachers were also asked to instruct students to return the envelopes the following day. A special announcement was made at the end of the day during the daily afternoon announcements for students in Grades 3 and 5 to take the envelopes home, give them to their parents, and to return them the next on the following day. Forty-eight percent of the invitations to participate were sent to Spanish-speaking homes.

### *The Participants*

Three hundred and thirty invitations to participate were sent home to the parents of 384 students, accounting for siblings in Grades 3 and 5). Twenty-four parents responded yes, 53 declined to participate in writing, and 253 parents did not respond at all. An attempt was made to interview every parent who agreed to participate. However, 22 parents participated in the study because two parents did not attend the focus group interviews. Most of the participants were mothers; less than 15% of participants were fathers. No parent participant was employed by the school district, although one father was married to a school employee at this site.

Non-English speaking parents were given the choice to participate in a heterogeneous language group, but all felt more comfortable in a separate group conducted in Spanish only. All English-speaking parents were given the choice to participate in a Spanish-speaking group with a translator. However, all English-speaking parents chose to participate in the English-speaking group. A few bilingual parents expressed no preference regarding group participation (e.g., Spanish or English), but they eventually chose to participate in the English-speaking group. In the end, two focus

groups were conducted in Spanish, and two were conducted in English. Having the advantage of being bilingual in Spanish and English, I conducted all interviews. More information about the group, such as race, age, gender, education level, and income, will be provided during the discussion of the data analysis.

### *Participant Demographics*

The participants in this study ( $n=22$ ) were primarily Hispanic and Black and reflected the overall cultural composition of the school. A few white parents ( $n=3$ ) also participated. The members of Focus Group 1 (FG1) and Focus Group 2 (FG2) were Hispanic and the interviews were conducted in Spanish. Most participants in FG1 and FG2 were stay-at-home mothers. In contrast, members of Focus Group 3 (FG3) and Focus Group 4 (FG4) were English speaking. These groups had the fewest parents ( $n=4$  and  $n=5$  respectively), and the majority were working mothers. Parents in all four focus groups spoke freely and shared prior experiences, views, and opinions on topics ranging from state and federal school rankings to racism.

### *Data Collection*

#### *The Interviews*

I selected focus group interviews as the main source of data collection for this study because they can provide a setting where people grouped together may be “emboldened to talk” about a common topic (Glesne, 2006, p. 79). I conducted all the interviews at the school because it was the most familiar and convenient place selected by all parents. All interviews began at 6:00 p.m., and all focus groups were completed in 2 weeks. The interviews lasted 90 to 120 minutes with at least one break. Parents were provided with refreshments.

During the focus group interviews, participants were asked three basic questions. First, participants were asked to share their perspectives and decision-making processes about school choice, including why they decided to stay at J. E. McCaskill Elementary School. Second, participants were asked to share their reasons for enrolling or not enrolling their children in the free supplemental education services (SES) offered on site.

Finally, participants were asked to elaborate on how they learned about the low-performing status of the school and about their reaction, ensuing conversations, and discussions. In addition, participants were also asked to elaborate on their understanding of the term low performing. All participants were given the opportunity to contribute any final thoughts.

The interviews were digitally audio-recorded. I used the audio files to complete the transcriptions of all focus groups and to enhance my field notes of the interviews and the interview settings. The interviews also were video recorded in VHS format. Like the audio files, these videos were used to augment my notes. However, the videos also captured silent, yet complex, looks, gestures, and non-verbal interactions among members. All English and Spanish language interviews and transcriptions conducted during this study were completed by this native Spanish-speaking bilingual researcher. Following the focus group interviews, I wrote field notes to describe the interview setting, participants, and overall environment. In addition, journal notes were taken after interactions with participants during a typical school day as an additional data source to identify key factors commonly affecting parental decision making about school choice and SES, as well as the interaction between such factors (Wolcott, 1994).

### *The Survey*

After participants were selected for this study, they were asked to complete a survey to, “supplement and triangulate qualitative data” (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 306). Surveys were available in Spanish and English. The first 10 questions of the survey asked basic demographic information: gender, age, level of education, income. In addition, all participants were encouraged to write comments or notes during the demographic portion of the survey to expand or to explain their responses. Most participants did not write additional notes or comments.

The second part of the survey consisted of five open-ended questions. Parents were asked to report their understanding of No Child Left Behind (2001) and their understanding of the term low performing (see Appendix C). The survey was administered at the beginning of each focus group interview. Most parents completed the 10 demographic questions and 5 open-ended questions in approximately 15 to 20 minutes. Several parents in both Spanish-speaking focus groups appeared to be apprehensive about answering questions pertaining to job and income. Several Spanish-speaking parents also had difficulties understanding some of the open-ended questions. I provided clarification in Spanish during this portion of the study.

### *Field Notes*

Field notes, “the primary recording tool of the qualitative researcher” (Glesne, 2006, p. 55), were kept to augment the description of the interview setting, participants, comments, and the overall environment. Descriptive notes were taken sometimes during the interviews and at times after. Similarly, notes were taken after interaction with

participants during a typical school day. A more in-depth analysis of the surveys, interviews, and notes will be discussed in Chapter 4 of this study.

### *Document Review*

The documents reviewed during this study included the choice letter sent to parents from the office of the superintendent of schools. The letter explained to parents the status of the school as a low-performing school and informed parents of the choice provision under No Child Left Behind (2001). This letter was available in several languages, and it was sent home with students at the beginning of the school year. This document helped this researcher to become familiar with the status of the school and the provision of choice offered to parents.

Another document reviewed was the information packet sent to parents about supplemental educational services (SES). This information was sent home with students during the first 9 weeks of school. It was sent to schools for distribution from the district's Title I office. The information was presented in the form of a booklet, and it was available in Spanish and English. The school was informed that other languages were available upon request from the school district. The booklet, in contrast to the choice letter, was lengthy and confusing. It contained a very elaborate application form and several pages of contact information for tutoring companies.

District and school AYP data were accessed online. This information verified the status of the school and the district, number of teachers at this site, student demographic information, and testing results. In addition, the Title I office provided me with school and district information about student enrollment in supplemental educational services not available online. The information did not contain student names but rather total

figures of SES enrollment by school. This information was used to corroborate low enrollment figures in this school and across the district.

Additional documents reviewed by this researcher included the supplemental educational services (SES) guidelines given to all SES administrators, as well as memos and email messages addressed to the SES coordinator and the school principal. I also reviewed minutes from the regular district SES meetings facilitated by the district's Title I office.

### *Data Analysis*

Maxwell (2005) cautioned that, "one of the most common problems in qualitative studies is letting your unanalyzed field notes and transcripts pile up, making the tasks of final analysis much more difficult and discouraging" (p. 95). The initial data analysis included summarizing document and artifacts collected as well as site and participant observation notes, memos, and logs. Early data analysis of focus group interviews began by, "reading the interview transcripts, observation notes, or documents" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). A more in-depth reading of all interviews and survey data occurred after the notes were translated and transcribed by this researcher.

The general approach to data analysis of the interviews was guided by the three categories that Maxwell (2005) called organizational, substantive, and theoretical categories. In addition, connecting strategies were used as a way to, "look for relationships that *connect* statements and events within a context into a coherent whole" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 98). In addition, the data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Initial codes assigned that emerged from the interview transcripts of this study included: parents assessing and interpreting information and parental reasons for staying at this school. Other initial codes included: parents compare other schools, reasons for staying at this school, reasons for not staying at other schools, parents feeling welcome at this school, miscommunication with school or district about SES, lack of transportation, parents approve or disapprove of school practices, parents hold teachers accountable, parents hold other parents accountable, and parental positive or negative interaction with teachers or staff. Similar initial codes were then combined into broader super-ordinate categories. Using the criteria of frequency of occurrence and saliency, themes were determined.

Thus the data analysis method used in this study was thematic analysis (Glesne, 2006). This process involved “coding and then segregating the data by codes into data clumps for further analysis and description” (p. 147). I chose not to use a computerized data analysis program. I did the analysis of data, by hand, with the guidance of my dissertation committee. The objective was not to create generalizations about an existing phenomenon that would improve or enhance a school program, but rather to “categorize, synthesize, search for patterns, and interpret” what was “observed, heard, and seen” during this study (Glesne, 2006, p. 247).

### *Validity*

Maxwell (2005) addressed possible threats to validity by suggesting the use of triangulation. He wrote, “This [triangulation] reduces the risk that your conclusions will reflect only the systematic biases or limitations of a specific source or method, and allows you to gain a broader and more secure understanding of the issues you are investigating”

(pp. 93-94). Multiple sources of evidence that would provide multiple explanations of the same phenomenon were used in this study (Yin, 1993). These are: interviews, survey responses, participant and site observations, and reviews of documents and artifacts. In addition, four guiding questions suggested by Hollway and Jefferson (2000) for researchers working with ethnographic data were used to enhance the validity of this study. These are: What do you notice? Why do you notice what you notice? How can you interpret what you notice? How can you know that your interpretation is the 'right' one? Drafts of the case study were read by a key informant, who was a parent participant from each of the four focus groups.

#### *Role of the Researcher*

The role of the researcher is, "situationally determined, depending on the context, the identities of your participants, and your own personality and values" (Glesne, 2006, p. 46). I defined my role as a researcher following two main predispositions suggested by Glesne (2006). First, my role was as a researcher as I immersed myself into the world of factors and experiences that surrounded parents as they made decisions about school choice and supplemental education services. The second predisposition in this process was my role as a listener and learner and the responsibility to remain distant from the image of expert or authority (Glesne, 2006).

The site selected for this study was, at the time, the largest Title I school in the largest school district in this southeastern state. However, it was also my place of employment. I was one of the two assistant principals assigned to this school. This had both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, I had 4 years of experience at this site, and I had fully assimilated the culture of the school. I was familiar



with its needs, struggles, values, culture, and community. As a bilingual school administrator I was also fortunate enough to be able to communicate with 97% of all parents in a school of about a thousand students. The other 3% of parents spoke Hmong, Russian, or other eastern European languages. In addition, my prior work in predominantly minority schools has given me the skills to approach, to listen, and to analyze parent-teacher-student situations that came to my attention. Finally, as a Hispanic male, I understood very well the issues of racism and discrimination that parents shared with me during this study. Although parents brought with them their own experiences when dealing with school issues involving their children, I tried to listen to their concerns as I remained neutral and focused on their issues and conversations.

On the negative side, one of the most difficult aspects of conducting the interviews at this site was to remain a researcher and to avoid being the school leader (Glesne, 2006). I feel confident that I was able to remain a researcher and a listener. However, parents did not hesitate to ask me questions about school or their child's teacher. I respectfully listened to their concern, made a note of it, and before we continued with the interview, I assured the parents that the issue would be handled the next day.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

As described in Chapter 3, the main source of data was focus group interviews. A description of each focus group is presented in this chapter. Prior to data being collected from participant interviews, survey data were collected that provided information on participant demographics. In addition, the survey provided information to questions regarding parental understanding of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), and the term low-performing school. The findings of the focus groups are reported as the emergent themes in this study. Similarly, key documents were reviewed to determine the information parents received from the school and district regarding choice and supplemental education services (SES). These documents provided information about local and state test results and school performance ratings. The document review also provided background information to provide context and triangulation with interview data and parent survey data.

#### *Choice and SES at J. E. McCaskill Elementary School*

##### *Planning and Implementation*

As a member of the administrative team at J. E. McCaskill Elementary, I was directly involved in informing parents about the choice provision of No Child Left Behind (2001), and in the planning and implementation process of supplemental education services (SES) under NCLB (2001, §6316 [e]) at this school. The process of providing supplemental education services was a new experience for all stakeholders at this site. The opportunity to serve as the SES site director allowed me to better

understand the choice and SES processes under NCLB (2001, §6316). As a result, I was able to explain these processes to teachers and staff, parents and students, and the community. Similarly, it allowed me to be in a position to observe parents and to witness the creation of this new, socially-constructed world called supplemental education services (SES). As SES coordinator, I was also able to listen to parents as they shared their hopes, expectations, and concerns about SES. I witnessed the struggles of parents as they received and evaluated eligibility and enrollment information packets and as they would contact the school in search of answers.

Similarly, I was able to be directly involved with teachers as they internalized the repercussions of SES and as they shared their frustration with NCLB and school sanctions. Teachers were particularly frustrated with the knowledge that their classrooms would eventually be used in the afternoons by tutors and students. The frustration among the staff increased as the first day of tutoring came closer, and more for those teachers who received notices that their classrooms would not be accessible to them in the afternoons.

#### *The SES Parent Information Fair*

After weeks of coordinated planning between the staff of J. E. McCaskill Elementary School and the district's Title I office, the SES parent information fair was held at this school on a September evening. The school hosted over 20 different private tutoring companies. The atmosphere was tense, and the competition was fierce among tutoring companies as each student represented potential monetary gains for them. At the time of this study, each student eligible for SES was allotted \$1,250.00 by the district's Title I office to pay for tutoring services. Although the families were not involved in the

financial aspect of SES, once a parent secured the services of the tutoring company of their choice, the company would explain to the parents the number of sessions available to them based on the cost per session set by each company. The financial arrangements were handled entirely by the district's Title I office. Companies kept records of student attendance and were required to submit an original copy of their records to receive payment from the district. Most companies made their sessions last one school semester (or approximately 3 months) as they provided tutoring twice a week.

Over 350 families registered at the door on the night of the fair. In comparison, a typical parent night held at this school would attract at most 130 families. The fair appeared to be organized chaos as parents and children milled around, stopping at various information tables set up by each company. Contributing to the tense atmosphere among tutoring companies was that the location of their booth was randomly assigned. Foldable tables (approximately 5' x 2.5') were set up along the walls and in the center of the gym allowing parents and children to move freely among the companies' displays. Table numbers and company names were drawn at random earlier that day to determine their placement in the gym.

As the members of each tutoring company arrived to set up, a school staff representative provided them with a photocopy of the layout of the gymnasium that showed the booth location of every company. Tutoring staff were escorted to their assigned location by a school staff representative, and they were reminded not to change locations as they set up. Some companies immediately voiced their dissatisfaction about their location in the gym and said that their location was not as good as others' proximity to the gym entrance. When the doors opened for parents, school representatives

encouraged everyone to visit all the displays before making their decision. They were given a map of the gym, and the SES information packet containing the application forms created by the school district's Title I office. I observed that most parents stopped at the first set of information booths and many made their choice of companies shortly after.

Each of over 300 families had from one to seven or more members. The large number of attendees, many of whom were children, contributed to the noise. The scene was busy and crowded. Some children were running or roaming around with their friends. Some students were observed translating for their parents, although many companies brought translators or bilingual staff with them. Several parents expressed their disappointment when they learned that they did not qualify for SES and complained to me that they should have been informed of that fact ahead of time. I told those parents that their concern had been noted and that it would be shared with the district's Title I office. It was difficult for parents to understand that the school was the host and not the party responsible for the information distributed by the Title I office.

In addition to the commotion, the atmosphere in the gym was tense. Some efforts to recruit parents among tutoring companies were surreal. Booths were arranged with everything from balloons to interactive information systems. Some companies offered free incentives (e.g., video games, coupons, prizes, and small cash prizes) if parents enrolled their children with them that night. Although the night ended significantly less busy than it began, some companies talked with parents past the designated ending time of 8:00 pm.

### *Tutoring Services*

Once tutoring services began, some of the better-known companies like Sylvan Learning Company had between 25 and 30 students, with a staff of only two to three tutors. Other companies had 10 or less students. Two companies cancelled their involvement with J. E. McCaskill Elementary. One of these companies had only 4 students on their roster at that time. The staff and I speculated that the number of students might not have been enough to generate a profit. In this case, the four students were absorbed by another tutoring company.

NCLB (2001) stipulates that schools under SES sanctions cannot provide their own SES services. However, tutoring companies hired teachers from the same district or schools where SES services were being provided. As a result, several teachers who were employed during the school day by J. E. McCaskill Elementary also provided afternoon SES at the same location. Tutoring began after staff work hours at 2:15 p.m. and ended at 4:15 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays. In many cases, the teachers tutored the same children they had been working with earlier in the day.

SES was in full force at J. E. McCaskill Elementary by mid-October. As the semester progressed, some companies experienced a decline in participation due to student attrition. As a courtesy to the tutoring companies, I agreed to contact parents and ask them why their student stopped coming to tutoring. Most parents said that their child had decided not to return to tutoring. Other parents said that going to school all day and attending tutoring in the afternoon made for a long day for their students. A few parents said that tutoring interfered with other after-school activities. Almost all parents

mentioned that they had stopped sending their child to tutoring because of the lack of bus transportation home after tutoring.

Under SES sanction, a school has no control over the use of the school's classrooms during afternoon tutoring sessions. Teachers at J. E. McCaskill Elementary, and who were hired by a private tutoring company had to vacate their classrooms by 2:15 in the afternoon. Some staff members chose to work at the back of their classroom because they supposedly wanted to watch their room; others moved to a different location within the school to work (e.g., library), and others, who would normally stay and work in their rooms, went home.

Having tutoring companies use teachers' classrooms created a feeling among teachers of being "taken over" or being "invaded". The choice provision of NCLB (2001, §6316) did not deliver as powerful and observable blow to staff morale as SES did. Having tutoring companies come in to J. E. McCaskill Elementary was a clear reminder that this process was taking place as a sanction to the school under No Child Left Behind, and that it was not just a free tutoring program for students. The weekly faculty meetings prior to the first day of tutoring were tense and filled with anticipation and feelings of uncertainty about the SES process. Casual conversations usually involved concerns about outside companies' taking over classrooms and about the uncertainty of what would happen if things did not improve.

Outside tutoring companies occupying teachers' classrooms also created some predictable problems in the school such as missing personal belongings, things out of place, depletion of school materials, broken or stolen items. Tension among teachers continued to increase exponentially as incidents of damaged, lost, or stolen items were

reported almost every day following tutoring. Many tutoring companies employed staff unfamiliar with working in a school setting or with 10 students or more. It was common for tutoring companies to report discipline problems due to student inattention or insubordination. However, the district's Title I office had instructed all SES schools not to interfere. Although we had been told that the students were not under our care after 2:15 p.m., discipline problems and issues of insubordination and disrespect were hard to ignore because they involved the same students we worked with during the day.

I noticed that this was also hard for the students to understand. For example, a student who would not follow a tutor's instructions would quickly follow directions if I or another staff member walked by when they were being redirected. Tuesday and Thursday afternoons evolved into assisting tutoring companies with day-to-day tasks of working with students such as talking to Spanish speaking parents, contacting parents of sick children, dealing with late pick ups, and regularly assisting with discipline issues.

#### *The Survey*

All participants were given the opportunity to answer four questions about their knowledge of topics associated with No Child Left Behind (see Appendix C) including: choice, supplemental educational services (SES), adequate yearly progress (AYP), and No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001, §6316). Participants also were asked to answer one question about their understanding of the term low performing. Overall, the level of understanding about NCLB among all participants varied from no knowledge at all to a basic understanding of school choice and tutoring. Some parents left some open-ended questions blank.



*Parental Knowledge of No Child Left Behind*

All 22 participants indicated that they were aware of the existence of an education act called No Child Left Behind. For the most part, Hispanic participants responded by simply writing *yes* to this question. Seven of the 13 Hispanic participants wrote additional comments. Two participants noted that the purpose of No Child Left Behind was to ensure that all children learned the same thing, and three participants reported knowing about NCLB from letters sent home from school. Only one Hispanic participant expressed interest in learning more about NCLB. One participant reported to be somewhat aware of NCLB and indicated that this is the law that helped all children finish school or to pass the year with good grades. This response was, “Si, un poco. Es para alludar a los niños a que terminen la escuela o que pasen el año escolar con buenas notas” (Yes, a little. It is to help children finish school or that they finish the year with good grades).

All of the nine English-speaking participants reported awareness of No Child Left Behind. However, only five participants expanded on their responses. For the most part, English-speaking participants who expanded in writing beyond ‘yes’ as their answer noted that the purpose of NCLB was to help all children. They wrote:

“It is supposed to ensure that every child receives quality education regardless of socio-economic or geographic figures.”

“Yes. This program was implemented by President Bush to ensure that no kid is left behind in class.”

“Yes. It a program were [sic] child [sic] are behind or having problers [sic] get extra help with there [sic] wekness [sic].”

One English-speaking participant reported an interest in learning more about NCLB. Another reported to know about NCLB and that it helped their struggling student with school. This parent said, “This plan is a great part in my child’s life because of his struggles throughout the years.”

#### *Parental Knowledge of Adequate Yearly Progress*

Participants also were asked about the adequate yearly progress (AYP) schools must achieve under No Child Left Behind. Five Hispanic participants reported to be aware of AYP, and five more reported not to be aware of it. Only one participant indicated interest in learning more about it. Two Hispanic participants did not respond to this question, and only one participant indicated to be somewhat familiar with AYP.

For the most part, English-speaking participants indicated they had heard about AYP. Three English-speaking parents reported not knowing about AYP, and two of them were very specific as to indicate that they had never heard of it. One of them wrote, “Never heard of it!” No English-speaking participant indicated an interest in learning more about AYP. Another parent wrote, “Yes, I have heard of these goals. It is how the schools are graded on performance of the students academically. Whether or not the students are progressing and performing on grade level.”

#### *Parental Knowledge of the Choice Provision under NCLB*

In addition, participants were asked to comment on their understanding of school choice. This question received the most answers by both English and Non-English speaking parents. Only one participant, Hispanic, did not answer this question. Both groups of parents reported their understanding of choice to be their say in where their child attends school. Similarly, both groups reported that school choice meant the

opportunity to go to a school that better prepares their student if they are not satisfied where they are. One Spanish-speaking participant used this question as an opportunity to write their perspective about J. E. McCaskill Elementary School. On several occasions, Spanish-speaking participants expanded their answers to include a comment about the school, their teacher, or about the future of children, such as, “I am very happy in this school and I would not change my children. They have been studying here since they were little.”

A comment by one of the English-speaking participants about choice indicated a more in-depth understanding of this topic than all other responses. The participant touched on issues such as bussing and overcrowding. This participant was a White female and former elementary school teacher. She and her husband lived in the attendance zone for J. E. McCaskill Elementary and her two children attended this school. She wrote:

First, it was supposed to be the end of bussing and everyone could send their children to the school of their choice. Many people chose schools that became overpopulated. Now it seems that they are trying to keep the idea of “neighborhood schools” while trying to address the schools that are too full.

#### *Parental Knowledge of Supplemental Education Services*

Another question asked participants if they knew that free tutoring services, supplemental education services, or SES, were offered at persistently low-performing schools. The second part of the question asked participants if they had chosen to enroll their student in tutoring at J. E. McCaskill Elementary and, if applicable, to explain their reasons for declining such program. Approximately 82% of all participants reported they were familiar with SES. Two Spanish-speaking participants reported that they did not

enroll their children in SES. One felt comfortable helping their child at home if the teacher said they needed help, and the other reported that the student's teacher told them that tutoring was not necessary at this time.

As indicated earlier, Spanish-speaking participants expanded on their written answers to include personal comments about the school. Most additional notes were written on the margins of the questionnaire and most included comments of appreciation or gratitude about services provided by the school. One Spanish-speaking participant indicated that she had enrolled her child in tutoring expressing that this is a great opportunity to enhance and support her child's education, particularly if the child is not doing well in a certain area. This parent continued by expressing her gratitude for everything the school does for the benefit of all students. She also expressed her gratitude for teachers and other persons who help her communicate in English when she visits the school. She wrote:

Si, los escribi, porque para ellos es de un gran apoya, la ensenanza. Ya que aprenden mas y si es una area, no andan bien, los ayuda mucho esas clases. Yo la verdad estoy muy agradecida con la escuela y muy contento por todo lo que hacen en beneficio de sus estudiantes. Con los maestro, y para mi agradecida con las personas que nos traducen ya que yo son una que no habla Ingles.

(Yes, I enrolled them, because for them that is very supportive, the education. Because they learn more, and if it is an area where they are not doing well, those classes will help them. To me, truthfully, I am very pleased with the school and very happy for all you do to benefit the students. With the teachers too, and the people who translate for us because I am one that doesn't speak English).

Two English-speaking participants reported not knowing about SES at all. Finally, two more participants, one English and one non-English speaking, did not offer any written response. Only two Spanish-speaking and five English-speaking participants who were eligible for SES reported enrolling their children in tutoring.

*Parental Understanding of a Low-Performing School*

The last survey question asked participants to describe their understanding of a low-performing school. All English-speaking participants responded. Participant understanding of this term varied, and ideas ranged from, “a school where students perform poorly” or “need extra help,” to “a school where there are not enough teachers.” Three participants in this group included in their responses facts about a school deemed low performing related to NCLB, including:

“A school that has not met the AYP goals for three years.”

“A school that does not pass state tests. The children do not have high enough scores in reading, math, and writing. They have not progressed enough in those areas. Unsure of what percentage is to be met.”

“Based on certain standardized tests the school average is below a set number.”

Other responses from the English-speaking group about their understanding of a low-performing school were less specific when compared to the latter responses. However, all reported a basic perspective of a low-performing school, including:

“That a child maybe having problems in reading or math and may need extra help.”

“It means that it is not meeting the expectation of the district.”

“A school where the students are performing below state regulated laws. Where there are few teachers.”

“A school of lower standards of child not up to par grade level.”

“The students’ scores don’t meet the predetermined statistics.”

Responses from the Spanish-speaking groups were also varied, but all indicated basic knowledge about a low-performing school. However, three Spanish-speaking participants did not provide a written answer to this question. For the most part, the perspectives among this group matched those of their English-speaking counterparts where low academic levels were identified as a common response. One participant in this group indicated that a low-performing school is the responsibility of the teacher as well as the student. This parent said, “Bajo progreso es depende tanto del estudiante o del maestro. Por ejemplo la maestra(o) tiene que estar mas pendiente y enseñar o explicarle hasta que el lo entienda. Se lo voy a agradecer.” (Low progress [low performing] depends on the student and the teacher. For example, the teacher [male or female] has to be more aware and teacher or explain something until he [student] understands it. I’d appreciate it). Other participants in this group shared this notion and reported a collective view of schooling where responsibility is given to all stakeholders (e.g., teacher, parent, and student) emerged from this group.

Another Spanish-speaking participant reported that a low-performing school is where an academic subject or subjects are at a low level and did not reach its goals. This parent also indicated that it was the responsibility of teachers and parents to encourage our children to reach a better future. This parent wrote:

Es las que no tienen mayor aprovechamiento por alguna materia o materias y no alcanzaron su nivel alto, pero mi confianza es que esta escuela alcanzara su meta con la ayuda de los maestros, de nosotros los padres y el poder alienta a nuestros hijos a mejorar su futuro. Adelante y con fuerza [J. E. M. Elementary].

(It is the one that does not have major achievement [or success] because of a subject or subjects and it did not reach a high level, but I trust that this school will reach its goals with the help of teachers, us as parents and being able to encourage our children to better their future. Onward with strength [J. E. M. Elementary] (or Godspeed).

Finally, a third Spanish-speaking parent indicated that low performing was a school where general academic percentages are at a low level. Upon a generic study of student growth and student grades, this participant continued, comparisons were made with other schools since tests alone reflected many differences among schools. The quotation was:

Que los promedios academicos a nivel general no llegan a un nivel muy alto al hacer un estudio generico de todo el apredisaje y grados de los ninos al hacer los comparativos junto a otras escuelas, ya que muchas veces los examenes reflejan mucha diferencia entre escuela y escuela.

(That the overall academic averages do not reach a very high level when a generic study is done of all learning and student grades, because many times the exams reflect a lot of difference between one school and another).

### *Participant Demographic Data*

The resulting sample for this study yielded 22 participants. Table 1 describes the number of participants per focus group as well as the racial composition of each group. The column labeled *other* is included in this and subsequent tables, however, the two parents who would have been listed as *other* (i.e., Asian) did not appear at any of the focus group interviews. I had hoped that they would have come in to participate in one of the focus groups as they had shared with me repeatedly that they would try to do so.

Table 1 *Ethnic Distribution of Participants by Focus Group*

Focus Group	Ethnicity of Participants			
	Black	Hispanic	Other	White
FG 1		7 parents		
FG 2		6 parents		
FG 3	3 parents			1 parent
FG 4	3 parents			2 parents

Approximately 73% of all participants were between the ages of 30 and 40 years. The largest age group of participants was between 30 and 35 years (i.e., 9 participants) followed closely by 35 and 40 years (i.e., 7 participants). Table 2 shows the age and racial distribution of all participants.

Table 2 *Age Distribution of All Participants by Ethnicity*

Age	Ethnicity of Participants			
	Black	Hispanic	Other	White
25–30 years	1			
30–35 years		8		1
35–40 years	4	3		
40–45 years	1	1		1
45–over		1		1



Twenty-three percent of the participants were single women. This includes those who were divorced or who never married. Approximately 45% of all participants were married women, and 27% of all participants were married men. One female participant identified herself as *no answer* and one male participant identified himself as *widower* on their participant survey.

Seven participants reported high school as their highest level of education. These participants were mostly female and Hispanic. Five participants reported Community College, and five others reported university as their highest level of education. The majority of Hispanic participants indicated a level of education no higher than high school. The majority of Black and White participants indicated a level of education of community college or university. The lowest levels of education were reported by two female Hispanic participants (i.e., no formal education and elementary education). Both participants were first generation immigrants to the United States and reported that hardship growing up forced them to start work at an early age. Table 3 shows the highest degree held by participants in this study.

Table 3 *Highest Degree Held by Participants by Ethnicity*

Highest degree held by participants	Ethnicity of Participants			
	Black	Hispanic	Other	White
No formal education		1		
Elementary school		1		
Middle school		1		
High School	1	6		
Technical School		2		
Community College	3			2
University	2	2		1

Additional survey data gathered from participants included occupation, annual income, number of people living in the home, and the number of years the family had been associated with this school. The majority of participants reported their annual income to be *zero* and *stay at home* as their occupation. These participants were all Hispanic females. Similarly, Hispanic participants reported the largest number of people living in one home (i.e., 5 people or more per household). Hispanic participants also reported the most years affiliated with J. E. McCaskill Elementary School (i.e., 5 or more years). Four participants reported an income of \$40,000.00 annually or higher. Of these, three were Black and one was Hispanic. Three participants with the highest annual income reported a level of education of high school or better. One parent reported having a 4-year university degree, one reported community college, and one reported high school as the highest level of education. Table 4 shows the income levels, number of people living in the home, and the number of years affiliated with McCaskill Elementary.

Table 4 *Income, Household, and School Affiliation*

Annual income	Ethnicity of Participants			
	Black	Hispanic	Other	White
0		7		
\$10 – 20 K/yr		3		1
\$20 – 30 K/yr	1	1		
\$30 – 40 K/yr	2	1		2
\$40 K/yr and over	3	1		
Total number of people in the home				
0 – 2	1			
3	2	3		1
4	3	2		2
5 or more		8		
Number of years affiliated with this school	Black	Hispanic	Other	White
1 – 2	2	2		1
3	2	3		1
4	2	3		
5 or more		5		1

### *Document Review*

Document analysis of handouts and other literature received at SES district meetings, those provided by the district's Title I office, and other documents found at J. E. McCaskill Elementary as well as information available online indicated that the overall parent/student participation rate in supplemental education services (i.e., tutoring, SES) at J. E. McCaskill Elementary School at the time of this study was of 32% of all eligible students ( $n=781$  students). This number is certainly not representative of the entire school district. However, after an examination of Title I and SES district-wide SES data, I determined that other schools in the district also exhibited similar low participation rates among all eligible students. Therefore, low student/parent participation rates in SES at J. E. McCaskill Elementary School mirrored those of the entire school district. This low participation comparison could be made among all students eligible to participate in SES (i.e., economically disadvantaged students).

Further analysis of district documents and data indicated that the official number of students who participated in SES at J. E. McCaskill Elementary School by April of 2008 was 34.57 % of all eligible students at this school. According to the school district, the total number of students enrolled at J. E. McCaskill Elementary as of April of 2008 was 907 students. Of these, 781 students met the economically disadvantaged (ED) criteria and were eligible to participate in SES. However, only 333 students applied for SES and only 270 students enrolled in supplemental education services at J. E. McCaskill Elementary by April 2008. Further examination of district and school documents indicated that by April of 2008, the number of students who enrolled in SES across the entire district were 28.87 % of all eligible students.

### *Focus Groups*

Focus group one (FG1) was conducted in Spanish. Seven parents, five women and 2 men participated in this group. With the exception of one participant aged 35 to 40, all participants in this group were between 30 and 35 years of age. Most listed high school as their highest level of education. One person listed middle school as the highest level of education and another listed university as the highest level. Two participants reported to be divorced and the rest were married. Most FG1 participants listed their occupation as *stay at home* and checked *zero dollars* as their annual income.

Focus group two (FG2) also was conducted in Spanish. Six parents, five women and one man participated in this group. The age range of the participants in this group varied. The group included two parents aged 30 to 35, two more aged 35 to 40, one parent aged 40 to 45, and one 45 to 50 years of age. The education level in this group varied as well. One participant indicated having no schooling at all in her country of origin. Another reported elementary as the highest level of education. Two parents listed high school as their highest level of education. One person indicated having completed a trade/technical education program, and one person reported graduating from a 4-year university. Two participants reported being divorced and the rest were married. Most FG2 participants listed their occupation as *other* or *stay at home* and checked *zero dollars* as their annual income. One parent reported an annual income of \$20,000–\$30,000 and another reported her income to be \$40,000 a year or over.

Focus group three (FG3) was conducted in English. Four parents, three men and one woman, participated in this group. With the exception of one widower participant, all participants in this group were married. One White parent and three Black parents ranged

in ages from 25 to 45 years of age. Most listed community college as their highest level of education and one person listed university as the highest level of education. Most FG3 participants listed their occupation as *other* and one checked *technical*. Two parents reported their annual income to be \$30,000–\$40,000 and two others reported an annual salary of \$40,000 or more.

Focus group four (FG4) was an all-female group and was conducted in English. Five mothers participated in this focus group interview. With the exception of one divorcee, all participants were married. The one White parent and the four Black parents ranged in ages 30 to over 45 years. Two parents reported community college as their highest level of education, two others reported university, and one person reported high school as her highest level of education. Two participants checked their occupation as *other* and one checked *stay at home*. The last two parents checked *medical* and *education* as their occupation. Annual salaries in this group were varied and ranged from \$10,000 to over \$40,000 dollars a year.

### *Themes*

The data gathered from the focus group interviews revealed five recurring themes related to parental perspectives and decision making processes regarding choice and supplemental education services (SES) under No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001, §6316). The first theme was feeling of *belonging* at J. E. McCaskill Elementary School. This was followed by a second theme voiced by parents who felt that for their children to succeed, they needed to *do things themselves*. The third theme emerged as parents shared their concern about grades given by teachers at school and end-of-grade test results, and the effect that too much testing had on children, particularly the effects of testing non-

English speaking children too early. For this reason, parents believed that there was a *lack of relationship between learning and testing*. Parents felt strongly that the information about choice and supplemental education services provided by the school and the district was *confusing*, the fourth theme. Some parents felt that the school said one thing and the district did another or vice versa. One Spanish-speaking parent summed up this feeling by saying, “Nos dan son dos caras!” (They are two-faced). Finally, parents appeared to be very knowledgeable about the inner-workings of J. E. McCaskill Elementary School and the school district. They *repeatedly offered suggestions*, the fifth theme, about how to fix the school to how to spend the district’s budget. The themes are expanded below using data gathered through the focus group interviews, surveys, documents analysis, and observations.

### *Belonging*

Most parents in all four focus groups said that feeling welcome, being greeted when they visited the school, not feeling judged because of their race or language, and being able to communicate with teachers and staff regardless of their native language made them feel like they and their children belonged at J. E. McCaskill Elementary. Parents also explained why they did not belong at other schools. One parent in focus group four (FG4) said that she could not be at a school where parents were so interested in brand names and the type of car they drove. She said that she was trying to raise her son to respect people not material possessions. Another parent, in FG4, said that she did not want her son to be the only minority in the school. Most parents in the Spanish-speaking groups reported being victims of some type of discrimination based on language at other schools. They said to have felt judged and unwelcomed when they entered these

schools. The parents who had not experienced this first said they knew of a friend or a relative who had. Several Spanish-speaking parents said that feeling unwelcomed began in the office when staff did not speak their language. Most Black and Hispanic parents reported personally experiencing some type of incident that they interpreted as discriminatory.

Parents who explained why they felt welcomed at this school often complimented the office staff. The principal of J. E. McCaskill Elementary had hired a bilingual office assistant to assist parents in the front office a year prior this study began and parents often asked for her by name. All participants in this study agreed that the office staff welcomed them by name in their own language. Parents in focus group 3 (FG3) noted that those who felt welcome and experienced a sense of belonging tended to volunteer or to offer to volunteer more often at the school than those who do not feel welcome at school (FG3 and FG2). Overall, all parents said that being here meant that they were happy with the school, and that their children were happy and doing well in school, which subsequently made the parents happier.

Several parents expressed that feeling safe at J. E. McCaskill Elementary equated to being happy at this school. All parents in FG1 agreed that school safety, help in their native Spanish language, and feeling welcome at school were the main reasons for staying at this school and feeling like they belonged here. One Spanish-speaking participant indicated that:

We are here because of the language. We feel secure; they know me in the office. One time, someone else was in the office and they double-checked me to ensure that they were given the right child to the correct parent.

Two Spanish-speaking parents in FG1 also shared with their group two personal experiences of moving to another school, and returning to this school because their children did not like their new school. One parent said, “McCaskill is welcoming and convenient to my home.” Other parents in FG1 said that they felt better about their decision to keep their children at J. E. McCaskill Elementary. Primarily after hearing the anecdotes from the two parents who wanted to take advantage of the choice provision of NCLB (2001, §6316) and visited other schools, yet came back feeling mistreated or judged. One parent indicated that although other schools may be academically higher, the family chose to be here because they did not feel different here. They did not feel mistreated here.

One parent in focus group two (FG2) said that the difference between this school and other schools was the communication with teachers. Other parents in this focus group also said that at this school, teachers would call them if their child was not performing well. One parent added that teachers here have a plan of action if their child is not getting good grades. Two FG2 parents traveled long distances every day to attend this school. Parents in FG2 did not report that being closer or convenient to their home was a reason for staying at this school. Overall, parents in this study felt comfortable, welcome, secure, safe, happy, and successful at J. E. McCaskill Elementary School every day. A few parents had been associated with this school for a long time. Several parents in the FG2 had other children in high school and one had a daughter in college. These parents said that they had been happy at this school and felt like they belonged here for a long time prior to this study. For that reason, two parents said that they no longer paid attention to



the choice letter sent to them every year. The following is evident in the conversation about satisfaction that appears below:

**Maria:** To tell you the truth, when we got that letter, since we have no interest in changing schools we just threw it away. I didn't save it or anything, for what.

*(Simultaneous conversation by several parents following Maria's comment)*

**Guadalupe:** I put it in the trash.

**Rosa:** I did the same thing

**Jose:** We feel secure here at the school.

**Alma:** I think that the security standards here, as parents, we feel that are very important. I think that when parents come to school, everyone likes how you are accessible too.

**Rosa:** I think that our kids, if they were not satisfied with the teachers, they would ask to be changed if they wanted to be changed. When the letter arrived I did ask my children if they wanted to change.

**INTERVIEWER:** You asked your children?

**Rosa:** Yes, nobody wanted to change schools. We asked them.

**INTERVIEWER:** What did they say? What type of conversation did you have with them?

**Rosa:** We asked them, would you like to go to another school? Well, first, they did not want to leave the other children. And second, they did not want to leave their teachers.

One parent said about school choice, "Para que vas a buscar lo que no has pedido?" (i.e., why look for what you haven't lost?). This parent concluded, with a

relaxed common sense tone in her voice to indicate that they were happy here and their children were happy here. Four FG2 parents shared how they asked their children if they wanted to change schools.

Rosa, a married woman in FG2 and the only college-educated parent in this focus group, shared that her child had made a compelling point about staying at J. E. McCaskill Elementary. This parent shared in her focus group that her child was very dedicated and puts a lot of pressure on herself. She said:

I told her, “but you could learn more in another school. She said, “But if you help me or my sister helps me, it would be the same if I am in another school. I don’t want to move.” I told her, “I just wanted to ask you in case you wanted to move.” She said, “No, I’m fine.” Now on occasions, I have talked to her and I have told her that I feel sorry that she is reading all the time and she is not interested in anything but reading. She is always reading, Saturday and Sunday too. Everyone is playing outside and she is reading. I told her, “Go out! Play, rest from reading for a little bit.” But she says that she has to complete her goal. She is putting pressure on herself. Students are putting pressure on themselves to learn. If I change her to another school, and she enters into the advanced system, the same thing is going to happen, the same thing. She is always going to be studying. Like I said, I have compared her to other children.

Maria, one of the divorced mothers in FG2 and a person with a technical education after middle school, shared that she too allowed her daughter to make the decision to stay at this school. She also said that her daughter would get sick worrying about going to a different school. She reported:

Look, I had a problem last year. [Daughter] has asthma, she was in the trailers last year (*This school had 12 mobile classroom or trailers at the time of this study*), I told her that we were going to change, that we were about to change schools because every time it rained and she got wet she ended up in the hospital with asthma. But she got more sick thinking that she was going to change schools. She used to tell me, “No, mommy, I don’t want to change schools.” She would get very sick worrying about it. She was already sick. She said to me, “Look, they are building a new building.” Imagine that, she begged not to be changed schools. I even bought boots for those rainy days and she would change here at school. But I did not change her to another school. Even with everything that we went through.

During the FG2 interview, the role of a child as an important factor in educational decision making in the family did not emerge immediately. The role of the child as the decision maker was masked at first by the narrative of a parent who portrayed herself as a confident matriarch. However, the role of the child as the decision maker became clear when Rosa, the college educated parent in this group, shared with the group the conversation she had with her child about changing schools. It would seem that the needs to succeed, to be free, and to have fun (Glasser, 1984) were primary for this child. This mother added:

In my situation, I told my daughter that we would have to continue to leave home at 6:35 in the morning if she wanted to stay at McCaskill Elementary. You are going to have to get up early! On the other hand, if you go to the school next door, you would be there in 5 minutes! We could even walk to school. My husband said the same thing to her. But, my husband said to me, “The school may be just right

there across the street, and it looks like it's a good school. But why are you going to change schools? What happens if she gets a teacher that is not good? What happens if she gets a teacher that doesn't connect with her? What are you going to do? She is not a problem child. Why are you going to move her?" You know, I always check and consult with [Husband, daughter]. In the end we do what I say we need to do, right? (*Laughter in the room*) And the children are happy.

Finally, a few parents in FG4 expressed their desire to stay at this school and felt like they belonged at this school shared some harsh personal experiences regarding racial discrimination or negative comments directed at them due to race or language. This group of parents found the school to be welcoming and friendly and all gave examples of the office staff welcoming them in the mornings and making time to talk to them, learn their names, and knowing who their children were. For the most part, parents in FG4 said that the school was friendly. These parents discussed a few issues of discrimination from the perspective of both Black and White parents. One of the few White parents in this study said that she had been approached by who she thought were her neighborhood friends to question her about keeping her children at J. E. McCaskill Elementary School. She reported:

I've had people who say to me, why are your kids still there. My snobby teacher friends that go to those other schools and work at those other schools say, "Your kid ought to be over here doing this." And I believe, because I've been there, that they, if they have a good teacher and they have a good rapport and they have a good administration that has goals, that they can learn anywhere they are at. And, we haven't had any academic problems. I think, in fact, because of the Title I stuff

that we get, that we get, I know, that like we have chess club and we have a science club and a science class, and a Spanish class, and all that kinds of stuff that my friends' kids and my teacher friends and their students at those big snobby schools, they, um, they might have chess club they may come at seven in the morning or whatever is an extra thing is not part of their every day. So I think that there's lots of parts, and the teachers are the best part.

Another parent shared that she, too, was approached by friends with what she interpreted as negative and racist comments about Hispanics. That was particularly upsetting for her because she is married to a Hispanic man and her children are part Hispanic. She explained:

I had someone, a White lady, tell me (*This parent is also White*), she said her kid was getting ready to go to school, and she lives near this area, she said, "where do your kids go to school?" and I said J. E. McCaskill Elementary and she said, "Oh". I said, what do you mean, "Oh"? She said, "Oh, well, there are too many Blacks and Hispanics there." And I'm like, you idiot, you know that my husband is Hispanic and my kids are Hispanic. (*laughter in the room*) And for us, it's just like you said, we don't, if there is a personality conflict, it's a personality conflict. It doesn't matter how much is in their bank account. It doesn't matter how light they are or how dark they are. How short or tall you are. How, that doesn't matter. And for her to say that, I was like, well, that's cold. Why don't you go register over, wherever! Because I was like, that's not the kind of people that, parents (*irate but laughing*) I told her, go to Laurel Farm Elementary (*another school*

*within this district*). That's where you need to be Laurel Farm! I couldn't believe that person said that. Go somewhere else and we'll keep our little diversity here.

One of three White participants in this study said, with satisfaction, "You know what the neat thing about being here is? ... We are a true minority school!" This perspective came from the former public school teacher who shared with the group how her former colleagues had criticized her for keeping her two sons at J. E. McCaskill Elementary School. Shortly after learning that one of the parents in FG4 did not want her son to be the "true minority" of the school, this former teacher shared that she stayed in this school because this was her neighborhood. She and her husband envisioned their two sons growing up with other children in the neighborhood. Sadly, the former teacher explained, the neighborhood children had slowly transferred to other schools in the area. She recalls when she heard inappropriate comments about Hispanic children told to her 5<sup>th</sup> grade son:

Well I think that when we, well, I've never heard, you know, we've got, the reason we [Speaking for her family] are here [area/school] is because it was our neighborhood. We wanted to be with our neighborhood kids. We wanted them to grow up with them and play ball with them. But I never heard any of those kids say, well, that school is all White. I've never heard anybody say that. But I've heard people say to my kid, "Your school's got all those Mexicans. Are you the only White kid there?" And he says, "oh, no, there a few more." But that's not his thing. He doesn't see it that way. He's learned differently. But they [Neighborhood kids] have a different perspective of him.

*Do Things Themselves*

A second theme was the notion that parents had to do things themselves. Parents in all focus groups discussed the importance of being actively involved in their child's education. Most parents repeatedly said that the success of students depended on the level of involvement of the parents in the school. Although three parents in this study held teachers as the only ones responsible for the success of students and school, they also reasoned that if this school was a low-performing school it was also due to other parents who were not as involved in the lives and education of their own children as they should. One parent indicated:

...one of my daughters, I think she was going on to second grade, and perhaps because I always investigate as much as I could about the teacher, but I did not like her, and did not like her, and I did not like her! I spoke with the principal, and she said you need to give her an opportunity. I said no! I don't like her! If I want [daughter] to continue at her high level, I need another teacher. I need you to change her to another class. I don't know if you are going to put her with this one or that one. I don't know, but I need you to change her! I told her, when a child or the parent does not feel that she can trust the teacher is not going to work. She changed my child to another teacher, and that teacher did not stay very long at the school, maybe another year or two. I don't know. She is no longer at school. Thank God I've never had any problems about anything. I think that it is very influential that the parents are involved in all situations. As a matter of fact, the teacher can be very good, but it has happen that on occasion, they call parents to come to meeting, and perhaps with the excuse that they don't speak English, they

know that someone will help them in Spanish, but they don't come to school. And these are people that don't work, they stay at home watching 'novelas' [soap operas] or painting their nails or something!

Parents in FG4 also recognized their teacher as one of the most important factors for remaining at this school, including the parent who had trouble with her child's current teacher. She, too, was satisfied with J. E. McCaskill Elementary. However, all parents in FG4 also recognized that parental involvement was important to the overall success of their students and the school. FG4 parents, like parents in FG3 and FG1, recognized that teachers are people too, and as such, some are better than others. The former teacher in FG4 said:

Well, I don't want to be snobby but, being a teacher you know that in like any profession there is always a squeaky wheel. There is always the bus driver that doesn't do the job, or the guy at Bi-Lo that is the slacker. So in every profession there is always somebody who is not as good as somebody else. But I always knew that where there are teachers there is always conflict. Just like you and I may roll around on the floor later, you know, we may disagree on something. *(Laughter in the room)* But, I think that if you get involved, and if you know your teacher, and you know your administration, that there are, they are there to help you, they are there for the kids. So, I made myself known and I found out about you and I found about the teacher. And I found out from you, and you, and you, who and what was going on in that grade and what was going in the next grade. And why didn't you like that 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher. And, I was one of those teachers that always said, "Oh, those mothers at home that want to be all in my business."



And then I took that hat off, and oh, it's the "mother." (*laughter in the room*).

What do you mean they don't do that. But I found out about those people, and I talked to the administration about concerns, and programs, and all they did was want to help. So when people said, "Why are your kids there?" and they still ask me, "Why are you bringing your Kindergarten baby there, when now they changed it and you can go somewhere else?" Because I know the people and I know how hard they work. I just know.

Most parents agreed that they were as responsible for the success of their child as their teacher. However, they held teachers accountable for ensuring that all children learned appropriately. A parent with a long association with this school complained that this school used to have good teachers 4 or 5 years ago. She said that all the strict teachers were leaving. All parents expected teachers to communicate with them, to be aware of their child's progress and needs, to solve misunderstandings, and to come to school ready to inspire children. A parent expressed that although she was happy with her choice to keep her child at J. E. McCaskill Elementary School, she knew that not all teachers were the same and noted that this was not a "perfect" school. She said, "Teacher capacity varies, depending on the teacher." She reported having a good rapport with an unnamed teacher at the school who would give her advice from time to time about other teachers at this school. For this she said:

I think that it depends on the teacher because fortunately, even for the report cards my experience with the teachers has been good. I get the notes to tell me to keep working with my child, or that my child is doing well, or that I need to work on the reading, or if I want to come to school and speak personally. That's what I'm

saying, personally, I have had good teachers, some more lazy than others, no? No? We have to be honest! We have to be honest. Some tell you to “do everything at home with your child.” May be not with those words, right, but very close. But, they don’t stop being good teachers. I have a teacher, that I’m not going to call her name out, that tell me about my child’s teacher and says to me, “[teacher] is going to be strict with your child.” She is good. But she always tells me every year, “that teacher is going to be good” and my daughter loves them. She has helped me a lot. One time she told me, “Try to change your child to another teacher. You are going to end up doing all the work.” So, even the teachers know each other, and know what teachers work and what teachers don’t. But in the end, thank God teachers do that because they see you here at school and they see you interested in school.

In contrast, another Spanish-speaking parent expressed his disappointment when he enrolled his children at this school. He noted that he had initiated communication with the school when he sent an email to the new principal. This parent indicated that he introduced himself and his family in the email, but complained that he did not receive a response from the principal. The same parent said that he had not gotten any calls from his child’s teachers, and that he was used to getting progress phone calls about his son at his previous school. This parent was also upset about not receiving a note from the teacher after his student received a low grade on a quiz, and expressed concern that one of his children was being “isolated” in a class where other English as Second Language students (ESL) were clustered. He felt that the school was purposely isolating or discriminating his child from the rest of the population and believed that placing a child

in an ESL cluster class was the equivalent to racial segregation. This parent moved his children to another school before the completion of this study.

The majority of parents in this study said that they were able to communicate very well with teachers (e.g., phone calls, texting) and other school staff, but noted that they had initiated the contacts. One of the few Spanish-speaking father participants said that although he was satisfied at this school, he also was unable to move to another area of the city now and that he had thought about moving.

Similarly, some parents (i.e., FG2 and FG3) also held other parents responsible for the success of other children as it affected the overall success of the school. Parents in FG1 also said that low parental participation affects the overall performance of the school. As one participant reported:

Of course! That's what I'm saying. To me, I believe that if you want your child to make progress, is that you are going to have to work with your child. If you don't want your child to make progress, then don't. Bottom line!

These parents agreed that success happened when teachers, students, and parents worked together. Several parents in other focus groups said that it would take parental involvement to turn a school around. Most parents agreed that parental involvement and support began in the home and recognized the need to be a part of their children's education as a top priority.

Overall, most parents elaborated extensively on the importance of parental involvement and on the need to work with their own children if they wanted them to succeed, regardless of the level of involvement of the teacher. One parent indicated:

Now, I am a little confused, because my child also brings home good grades as a matter of fact she has received awards, but when it's time to do the homework, I say let's do the homework and she tells me, "I don't understand how to do that." So, I have to try to help her to do the homework every night but sometimes she tells me, "You know, my teachers are not checking homework" or "The kids don't take the homework and she doesn't say anything." And I tell her, I don't care about other kids you're going to do your homework. It's not your problem if the teacher checks the homework or not. That's not your problem. Homework is a battle. I have to push them every night. Now I see him when he's in and not doing homework and that he's struggling to do the homework, but then he gets rewards and I get a note that he's doing very well and blah, blah, blah, but why is he having trouble? I don't understand it.

Some parents discussed how they could better help their children. For example, parents in FG2 discussed the meaning of tutorial services by looking at the purpose of tutoring in their school. These parents were not quick to blame the teachers for SES as a sanction. Rather, they tried to understand what events took place at the school prior that led to the implementation of SES. When I asked them if receiving letters about tutoring meant to them that their child was not learning appropriately at this school, this group focused on exploring what they could do as parents to remedy the situation as well as learning why some children would need tutoring in the first place. Rather than making comparisons of school systems in other countries or blaming teachers, this group of parents wanted to better understand the situation. The following exchange exemplifies the thinking about parental involvement in this focus group:

**Maria:** No, I think that what they are trying to do is to help them [students] a little bit to increase the level they have now. Because many times it's just hard to keep 15, 20, or 25 kids focused. On the other hand, I imagine that tutoring classes are much smaller classes. So, logically it is easier to educate 10 or 15 children than 25 or 30.

**INTERVIEWER:** OK

**Alma:** And they also focused on subjects that they need help with.

**Rosa:** It is also very easy to say that the teachers are not teaching. But that is not the case. It's not that easy to say that. And I have heard that.

**Alma:** I also have heard that.

**Rosa:** But if you [as a student] are not paying attention to what's going on. And, if you [as a parent] can't help them, then how can you say that it is the teacher's fault?

All participants considered parental involvement central to the success of their student and the school. In particular, parents in FG2 also held other parents accountable and established a connection between low parental participation and a low-performing school. As one parent reported:

...For example, my child is in pre-K, and do you know what many moms do when we have parent nights? They sign in to be there at the meeting, and then they leave. We are just a handful of parents that show up for meetings. It's the same here. But every time I can, I come to the meetings at this school and I ask the teachers what's going on.

Finally, parents were asked to elaborate on a comment made during FG2 about having “faith” in the school. A parent said that having faith meant more than anything that parents and teachers would do their job so children can achieve their goals and reach their highest potential. Another parent explained that having faith included not only the job that teachers do with children every day, but faith in the teachers as they motivated and supported parents to help their students at home. Finally, another participant explained that having faith meant to have hope about the future. This parent explained that it also meant to hope that the children will put forth the effort and enthusiasm that they need to succeed.

#### *Lack of Relationship between Testing and Learning*

Parents in all focus groups agreed that there was a *lack of relationship between testing and learning*. This evolved as the third theme. Most parents questioned the purpose of standardized testing and wondered about the true value of classroom grades and the label “low performing.” Parents rejected the idea that J. E. McCaskill was a low-performing school based only on testing results. All parents agreed that test results could be influenced by different factors such as not being fluent in English. Some parents questioned whether learning could be assessed accurately based only on a child’s marks on a bubble sheet. Because most parents were aware of other schools’ ratings through friends or family, or had recently transferred to this school, they questioned how some schools were rated higher than J. E. McCaskill. In their eyes, those schools were at a lower academic level. Parents explained that children at McCaskill Elementary were receiving a higher level of instruction than at some other schools they knew about.

For the most part, parents in this study simultaneously praised the role of the teacher, held the teachers accountable for the progress of all students, and felt somewhat distant from teachers. Parents in FG1 expressed feeling distant from their teachers at times. These parents shared their concerns about teachers' comments that had little to do with how to improve on an academic deficiency. For example, one parent in FG1 reported that the advice from her child's teacher before a test had been, "Make sure she gets a good night sleep and a good breakfast." This parent also expressed frustration about the amount of testing their children were subject to and rejected the idea that the only advice she could have been given by the teacher was to make sure her child rested the day before. Another participant in FG3 indicated that children were not being tested accurately on what they knew. As one parent in FG2 said:

I have an observation. You know the test that is coming up in the fifth grade, the science test. Don't worry about it. My daughter in seventh grade is telling me that they are just now learning that things that are going to be tested. This is impossible! I have to be frank with you we can't fool ourselves. We know if our children are learning or not because we've been to school, if your child is learning or not learning we know that. This is not about your getting an A, a B, a C or a D. I've learned that in this school with my first girl. If you, if us, if we, to be honest with you, do not make the child do homework, support the child, put pressure on the child, the child is going to have all the A's in the world and all the B's in the world but the bottom line is that we know if the child is learning or not learning. "But mommy" she tells me, "I'm just learning that now in seventh grade." Can you tell me that my child is going to be demanded that she knows this same things

in fifth grade, so that she can pass to middle school? I don't think so! Can you imagine the injustice that's going to happen? But I know that nothing is going to change right now but maybe in 2 years. But, we have to have fresh batteries with the children or when it comes to our children, because to be honest with you, if you don't make it happen at home, the teachers, is not that they don't do anything for them but they don't do it enough and is not going to happen at school only.

A few parents in FG4 enrolled their children in tutoring. Two parents in this group did not qualify for services and one more declined services without explanation. One parent enrolled her child in Saturday tutoring. She reported being pleased with the results at the time of this study and shared that she was told that her child had progressed very well. She quickly pointed out that her son was performing better than some of the other students at the “supposedly better” schools. This parent reiterated that she did not see a difference between this school and other schools, and that she was pleased to know that her son knew as much as other children in other “better” schools.

Parents in FG4 also discussed the possibility that the high number of students who do not speak English may not be able to test well in English. One parent said that language might be a factor on student scores. She reported:

...So, and I took also under consideration, is when you look in the hallways, there is so many Hispanic children, that, you're giving them a test with, English on it, word problems, if you probably put the little, the problem out there and not given them so many word problems with it, they can do it. So I take that into consideration, they students that you've got up here. And that you are giving them this work, with they have a barrier, you know, English barrier, so you have to take



that in consideration. I don't think that we are so low performing because of that, we have to take a look at the children that you have in the school too.

Finally, parents in FG3 questioned the educational system in this state more than any other focus group. Although they did not compare their school system to another country, these parents suggested that the status of the school is the result of the sum of several factors affecting our schools. In addition to class size and the nature of teachers who may be here "...not just here for a check," as one parent in FG3 said, these parents also questioned the nature of the state's testing program. One parent questioned if the state was aware of the different learning styles of children. She said:

I have a question, when they decided to do these tests that they put together for these children, and to say that their scores, or that they are at this level or that level as far as their education, did they [state or district] ever sit down and say we need to figure out how to do a test and find out if this child is a visual learner? If this other child is more hands on? Or, is this child is an auditory learner? Can this child listen and get the directions? You, you have different ways of learning. We have too [adults]. ...then you get into corporate America where I work that's how we break down our people to make money. This person knows how to do good with their hands, this other person knows how to do that. You take all those things and we make a work report. Have they ever tried to do that and get at the roots to have a good foundation and make children grow and branch out to where they needs to grow? Did they ever take a test to say we have more visually learning children we need to get them in a class where they visually seeing things all the time and actually have a nice teacher to do more visual tactics to get these

children to learn. This is where they are more eager to learn in their individual setting. OK, these children right here, they are more hands on. We need to get them in a setting where the teachers are currently working more hands on. Please don't tell me that Montessori, is that what you wanna call those schools? That was not it. That was a boo-boo you all made. But, I'm just saying (*laughter in the room*) they need to break it down that way, to see, well, wait a minute, we need to put Johnny and Kelly in a class, all they like to do is read, so we know that if you put reading in front of them they are going to ace it. You know, this is what our test needs to be a part of. This person is not, like you said, is not that they are less educated, but how do we know what they can do best?

These parents concluded that, “the test scores don't really tell the whole story about the school”. They questioned how the status of a school as a low-performing school is determined and questioned if students with limited English proficiency had been taken into consideration.

### *Confusing Information*

The fourth theme evolved from the frustration of parents regarding the information provided by the school district about supplemental education services. Parents said that the information was “confusing”, and some felt that they were being told different things. One participant in FG1 said, “nos dan dos caras” (they are two-faced) – referring to an inquiry about SES. Parents agreed that lack of transportation hindered the ability of many parents to participate in SES, and that limiting tutoring services to two subjects (i.e., reading and math) did not support all students. Participants were most frustrated with the fact that not all children attending a low-performing school were

eligible to participate in tutoring. Similarly, FG4 identified a problem with the notion of providing tutoring at a low-performing school. They said that this would only create a cycle when tutoring ended after the school made progress. Overall, the small number (6) of parents who were able to participate in tutoring expressed their appreciation for these services.

One issue regarding confusing information concerned the participants of FG1 more than any other. Although these parents did not immediately share any reaction to the status of the school as a low-performing school, these parents questioned the grades sent home on the school report cards after comparing them with the district report card and the overall status of the school. These participants questioned the value of an A given in class versus the status of a school deemed low performing. For example, one participant said:

The important question is, if my child takes home an A from his teacher, and in that scale he's coming out at a different academic level [*referring to the state report cards*], how are they evaluated, in what manner do they need help or what?"

In an effort to understand the school ranking system affecting this school, two Hispanic parents compared the grading system of their country of origin (Mexico) against their understanding of how grades are assigned at this school. They were not able to make sense of the reason for the low-performing status of the school. One parent asked, "Whoever sends out this letters [*referring to the district report card, and choice and SES letters*], are they trying to confuse us?" Another parent responded by saying:

No, what happens is that for example, on the report card he could be getting A's, for example my child is doing well in everything except writing, he has a "B" in writing, and the teacher is telling me that, that he is fine, that's not a low level, but when you check this scale that we're talking about, my child doesn't appear to be at a high level, he is at a medium level, that's my question.

For the most part, the conversations in FG1 and to a lesser extent in FG2 revolved around a comparison of grades and achievement in other countries —mainly Central and South America. Parents discussed several reasons that they believed would contribute to the school being deemed a low-performing school. They also discussed why children are graded differently in the United States. One participant reported:

In Mexico, if you have 100 questions answered [correctly] you get 100, and if you have 80 you get an 80, but for example here, if the highest student gets a 75 that child is given "A", and from there on you designate the other grades, but you did get a hundred. In other words, here they take or do the score according to the highest level achieved by the highest student, is not at the level that the school demands. Because, if you pay attention, and unfortunately pay attention when a Hispanic child comes recently from our countries, you will always see them receiving an award. And they don't speak very good English, but their academic level as far as mathematics... [incomplete statement – tone indicates agreement]

### *Parent Suggestions*

Parents in all focus groups repeatedly offered suggestions and ideas about how to fix the school. This became the fifth theme. Although they rejected the low-performing label, parents offered their suggestions on a variety of issues. Some parents suggested

that teachers should visit Mexico if they thought they have it “tough” at this school. Other parents suggested that the school district should “copy” what more successful school districts are doing. Parents also worried about the “cycle” created if schools implemented and then took away tutoring from students. A few parents offered ideas about how to better spend educational funds as they worried that this school system might not be able to provide for all students.

Parents in FG1 understood that this school was a low-performing school because of persistent low scores. These parents questioned the readiness of teachers to teach appropriately during the present school year. However, one parent placed the burden of teacher readiness and preparedness on the school and the school district when he asked, “Are you going to have the same problems next year?” He said:

And, if this is not the first year that you are low performing, so if last year you were aware that this school was aware of why was low performing, how come teachers were not prepared for this year? So that they can teach children and that the children are better prepared to take tests? Now, next year I have a child in second grade and I see the problems that we have in education, are you going to have the same problems next year, are you going to train the teachers for next year so that they don't have the same problems?

This parent suggested that the school had not taken action to increase student achievement. A subtle suggestion was made to appropriately train teachers to avoid being labeled a low-performing school in the future.

As mentioned earlier, parents in FG3 and FG4 were the English-speaking groups. These parents seemed more analytical and their recommendations appeared to be linked

to more in-depth issues such as curriculum or the school budget. The discussion about how to improve education among these parents evolved into a series of speculations about how the government funds schools, the sources of funding to support programs, as well as class size and use of the lottery revenue to support schools. Parents in FG3 also questioned the lack of attention to education in general in our country. They believed education was not a high priority in our culture. Although these parents did not elaborate on culture, they agreed that attention to sports and entertainment as a nation is excessive and possibly affecting children. The following dialogue represents the latter remark:

**Robert:** That's what the problem is. You're pumping the funding into the wrong thing. You know, if you're pumping funding into supplies, it's not going to be used to actually educate the kids. It's not going to impact the child immediately. I don't know, if you train the teacher a little bit is going to increase her knowledge, I know that. But I don't think it's going to impact the classroom I don't think that that's going to help the child right away. You know what I'm saying. That's a long-term thing. So to me you, you're gonna have to start giving raises to the teachers and stuff like that. That promotes bringing people into education. People are going to say that's the job that I want, you know, that's got to help me pay my bills. It's going to let me go a little further, so, you need to attract people to the job.

**Lucille:** I guess I can say that you need to put more money into the elementary schools period. This is where the foundation is. If they can understand the indication of a third grader, the educational level, if you can't read at their third

grade level, nine times out of 10 you can go out and get a job. You know, if you can read at a third grade level, you could read at a fourth-grade level if you push, and with the parenting and the teachers. So, we have all this money, going somewhere, like football games, I'm not going to say that sports are not a good thing, but we over do it. We are starting to make children to believe that the only thing they need to survive is to be an athlete or two make a song. You're not telling them the real things. Real people like Bill Gates do this. They don't think Microsoft came from a real person. I don't think they know who Bill Gates is. If you ask half the second graders they won't know. You see what I'm saying.

They're working with their material but they don't know who they are. They don't know who built the materials they're working with.

Most parents in all focus groups expressed their concern about students who were not able to enroll in tutoring due to lack of transportation. Some parents in this study who qualified for SES were affected by this issue or knew of someone who had not being able to receive tutoring because of it. One parent in FG3 shared his concern about the future of the SES program. He reasoned that if tutoring was a sanction, then when the school was no longer a low-performing school because tutoring had worked, tutoring would be taken away. A discussion ensued among FG3 parents about what would happen if the school improved after receiving SES and the program was no longer available to students. This group also discussed the logic of the tutoring program as a sanction. They said:

**Robert:** Now, one quick question. After you meet criteria, because I'm pretty sure that the school is going to raise their low-performance, are they going to stop it?

**INTERVIEWER:** Well, rules. Federal government rules dictate that...

[Explanation by interviewer of scenario where a school is no longer under sanctions and tutoring has to stop].

**Robert.:** That's not right! It's like the first graders now, what if they are going to have problems, these kids are going to have to do very, very well.

**INTERVIEWER:** Say that again?

**Robert:** Like the kids that are in first grade now

**INTERVIEWER:** OK

**Robert.** And when they come like in 3rd grade, see, let's say that, you're saying in 09, so by the time they come, it will be, they'll be

**INTERVIEWER:** It will be the school year 2010-2011

**Robert:** And let's say that the sanctions have been lifted and all that kind of stuff, I mean, you are talking about ALL the help going away.

**George:** That's wrong! They won't be getting any more help, that's wrong.

**Robert:** The point I'm getting at is that tutoring should be continued.

**Lucille:** Tutoring should be steady and continued

**Robert:** Yeah, from now until this place blows up.

As stated earlier, the parents of FG3 were the only participants in this study who discussed the nature of SES and the possible consequences after stopping SES. Their discussion led me to further explore their ideas about what would happen to future students if the school met its goals and SES was indeed discontinued. The possibility of stopping tutoring angered these parents. They reasoned that if SES is a sanction, then



NCLB (2001) may be used to punish schools if SES is stopped. One parent indicated that this would create a “cycle.” They said:

**INTERVIEWER:** Let’s say that we make it and that we all celebrate that we are not under sanctions any more. That means that we are not going to have tutoring. That’s a very powerful statement. What do you think will happen with the kids that are coming up?

**Lucille:** No child left behind!

**Robert:** What? It’s the reverse!

**George:** Interesting, what you are saying is that the solution is actually the punishment.

**Robert:** I know, right? The solution is actually a punishment

**George:** When things are going well?

**Robert:** They take it away!

**George:** Right, you take the punishment way, which is actually what you need to keep around, and...

**Robert:** We know you are not making the rules Mr. Fonseca

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh, I know, I’m taking myself out of the equation. [Laughter in the room]. I am trying to follow the comments you are making right now.

**George:** Well, I’m mean, like you said, for the school, this tutoring, this help, is a punishment...

**INTERVIEWER:** It’s a sanction. It’s telling your teachers and your principal, “you are not making the grade! Therefore, we are going to have to come in and provide additional help for your parents.”

**George:** And, and, and well the school is having someone tell, someone tell the school what to do. And, that part I can see, but that help for the children, you know, once, you know, you reach the reward it goes away. It seems like it's just going to start a cycle!

### *Summary of Findings*

This study began with the question, “what are the perspectives and decision making processes of parents regarding school choice?” The findings indicated that parents were well-informed consumers of information and that they tapped into several sources to gain information about the schools in their district. Almost all parents reported they had investigated the level of education of other schools in the immediate area. Several parents checked the school’s scores on the Internet. Other parents spoke to friends and relatives whose children attended nearby schools, and they checked and compared the performance of their friends’ children with their own. All parents reported talking to someone about the school before making their choice. Parents also relied on advice from their child’s teacher. Some parents reported that teachers helped them choose a school, and in some cases teachers helped them choose a teacher by sharing negative details about their teachers. These parents used this negative information about other teachers to meet with the school principal privately to request a change of teacher.

Some parents allowed their elementary-age children to make the educational decision regarding choice and SES. The results of this study also suggested that several elementary students may have reached beyond the idea of joint participation with their parents about choosing a school (Neild, 2005). In essence, some students appeared to have been allowed by their parents to make the decision to stay at a low-performing

school on their own. The child's decision to stay at this school, according to their parents, was based solely on the child's desire to be with friends.

This study also examined the perspectives and decision-making processes of parents regarding supplemental educational services. Findings indicated that the majority of parents in all groups reported being confused, disappointed, and at times, frustrated with informational documents such as letters, packets, flyers, sent home. These documents were written at the district's Title I office and were distributed to parents and students through the school. Parents reported that confusing information was sent home regarding the availability, accessibility, and qualifying requirements of supplemental education services (SES). Several parents, regardless of the language spoken at home, reported being frustrated about the limited subjects offered during tutoring. Others were concerned about the lack of transportation from after-school tutoring sessions. All parents who enrolled their children in tutoring expressed disappointment about the limited duration—3 months—of the tutoring sessions.

Some parents expressed concern and frustration after learning that tutoring services would stop if the school made adequate growth. A parent stated that this would only start a negative cycle. These parents believed that sanctioning a school, then offering tutoring, only to stop this service if the school made its goal did not help the next generation of children entering Kindergarten and first grade. These parents wondered about the educational future of these children and were particularly concerned about the academic year 2010–2011. One parent concluded that, “The solution is the punishment!”

The final question examined in this study explored parents' understanding of the term low-performing school. Findings indicated that most parents who chose to keep

their children at this low-performing school disagreed with the label. These parents shared a common perspective about other schools in the district as being lower than J. E. McCaskill Elementary. It seemed that parents thought that this school was not a low-performing school because other schools in the district were listed as being academically lower than J. E. McCaskill Elementary.

Parents reported they knew about other schools by talking to parents, visiting other school, or having their children temporarily enrolled at other schools prior to coming to J. E. McCaskill Elementary. This study found that all parents believed their children now attended a “good school”. Two parents chose to enroll their children at McCaskill Elementary even though they lived out of district. These parents were not entitled to bus transportation and had to make sacrifices to attend this school every day. These parents said that they chose to transfer to a welcoming school where teachers were supportive and the staff was welcoming. These parents also said that they did not see this school as a low-performing school because their children made good grades, were successful, and felt secure and welcomed by teachers and staff.

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS

This investigation of parental perspectives and decision-making processes about choice and supplemental education services in a large urban elementary school began with a historical perspective of the choice movement in the United States since the 1950s. This chapter presents an analysis and comparison of findings of this study with earlier findings about school choice. This analysis questions the notion that choice would give way to increased student and school performance due to competition as choice proponents have suggested. Similarly, this study supports and/or rejects earlier conclusions about school choice. Although societal dissatisfaction with the public schools has been identified in the literature for several decades (Dougherty & Sostre, 1992; Matthews & Hansen, 1995; Walsh, 1991), the results of this study also point to a discernable difference between a general or political dissatisfaction with the public schools and parental rejection of the public's low-performing ranking of a school. This chapter also presents an analysis of the group dynamics observed during focus groups, and an analysis of the themes generated by this study. The implications, limitations, and recommendations for future study are presented at the end. This chapter concluded with a brief epilogue about J. E. McCaskill Elementary School.

At the time this study was conducted, almost 1000 students attended J. E. McCaskill Elementary, a persistently low-performing school, and the largest Title I elementary school in the largest school district in this southeastern state. For the most part, the families who participated in this study had investigated other schools. However,

they had no immediate plans to leave. A few parents went as far as to indicate that they no longer read the choice letters sent home by the district every year. These parents said that they throw the letters away because this is their school and they are here to stay where they belong.

Although many parents in this study were informed about the low academic performance of this school, the majority of them chose to reject the label low performing. They also seemed to dismiss that other schools were ranked as better performing, perhaps to justify their decision to remain at this school. This study revealed that some of these parents also had suffered negative personal experiences or knew of other parents who had had a negative experience while visiting or attending other higher performing schools. The negative experiences were more often than not described by these parents as “discriminatory” based on race or language, or both. For others, these schools were less appealing because of low student diversity. It would seem that the decision making process among these parents may have included a “tradeoff” in potential academic benefits for their children at a better-performing school for the comfort of being among other students who shared the same ethnicity, or language, or both.

These findings may confirm those of Manna (2002) who indicated that the signals parents sent before choosing a school were not clear. They also are similar to the findings of other researchers who found that parental choice was, at least in part, based on others of similar ethnic background and/or race attending the school (Howell, 2006; Neild, 2005). Although it is clear that the above researchers were aware that parents chose a low-performing school (i.e., high school), it is not clear when the parents were aware of the status of the school. Conversely, the parents in this study investigated other schools

and were aware of the status of the other schools, but chose to remain at J. E. McCaskill Elementary. These parents were fully aware that the other school was a better-performing school when they chose to remain at this low-performing school.

Interestingly, some of the reasons reported by parents in this study for “staying” at a school deemed low performing under No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) also have been reported in the literature as reasons for choosing a new or different school prior to NCLB. However, those reasons were aligned more with being dissatisfied with a school than with choosing a different school to exercise the choice provision of NCLB (2001). In previous studies, the participants reported choosing a different school due to dissatisfaction with the teacher and/or school, distance from the home, grades, and not feeling welcome among the top reasons for choosing a different school. In contrast, parents in my post-NCLB study said that they had performed their own research about other schools and argued that other so-called better-performing schools in the district were really academically lower than J. E. McCaskill Elementary. They arrived at this conclusion based on their own investigation of other schools’ academic performance, or from conversations with friends and/or relatives whose children attended those schools. Moreover, parents believed the term low performing did not hold much value because the label or status of the school was assigned by outsiders based on arbitrary test scores. They said that “those people” from the North Carolina Department of Education were trying to “confuse” them with grades and rankings. To them, the label had been given by people who did not know the school or the people in it.

The results of this study also may question the notion held by choice proponents that choice will give way to competition and thus to educational improvement. The

findings of this study indicated that the majority of participants considered this school a “very” good school and chose to stay here because of their own assessment. Most participants agreed that this was a school where they felt safe and comfortable and where teachers interacted well with parents and students. Several parents had been affiliated with this school for many years. Their older sons and daughters, now in high school or attending college, had also attended J. E. McCaskill Elementary. These parents said that this school was good when their older children came through, and it was the same for their younger children.

The evidence of this study supported the conclusions of Powers and Cookson (1999) that, “choice parents tend to be more satisfied with the educational experience offered their children” (p. 111). The feelings described by parents who went to other schools could be interpreted as emotional factors that may have influenced their choice of schools. It could be that parents in this study, who had experienced “uncomfortable feelings” at a new school, signaled a desire not to attend that school and thus chose not to transfer to that school or chose to return to their originating school. Several parents in this study experienced varied levels of emotional discomfort, feelings of isolation, distance, avoidance, or even discrimination based on their ethnicity or language.

Choice theory (Glasser, 1984) was used as the organizational framework for analyzing parental thinking about school choice because some of the five genetically driven needs of this theory: the need to survive, to belong, to gain power, to be free, and to have fun seem to be the foundation of factors influencing parental perspectives and decision-making processes. Parents in this study repeatedly reported that they chose to stay at this school because they felt welcomed, safe, and happy from the moment they



entered the building. These parents also said that teachers supported them and their students, and therefore, they “belonged” here at J. E. McCaskill Elementary regardless of a state designation as a low-performing school.

### *The Story*

After having examined the perceptions and decision-making processes of parents whose children attended a persistently low-performing urban elementary school, it is still unclear to me if parents share a common understanding of the term low performing. It is apparent that many parents readily rejected this label. However, only two parents offered a direct answer regarding the question, “What would it take for them to change schools?” One parent said that a tornado would have to take down the school. The other said that violence would have to escalate to the point where his children could not be safe and stay at this school any more. However, given that choice and SES were the only two sanctions of NCLB (2001, §6316) in place at the time of this study, it is unclear whether parents would continue to base their decision to stay at this school on a personal rejection of the label low performing, if more severe sanctions were in force at J. E. McCaskill Elementary.

Fusarelli (2007) proposed the notion that staying at the original school was actually a choice. The findings of this study supported this position. J. E. McCaskill parents gathered information, considered alternatives, and chose to have their children remain here. During this study, I had the opportunity to observe most of the participants visiting the school and interacting with teachers and staff regularly. I also had the opportunity to observe them at school events held in the evenings or weekends such as parent meetings, book fairs, carnivals, and other school functions or performances. Thus,

I contend that these choice parents also were highly involved in the education of their children like other choice parents have been found to be (Powers & Cookson, 1999).

The question about how parents manage information about test scores, school rankings, and student grades continued to evolve as many parents in this study reported having searched for information on the Internet. Echoing prior research, these parents also reported having talked to someone before making a decision to come to or stay at this school (Neild, 2005; Teske et al., 2007). The findings of this study did not support lack of timely information as a hindrance to parental decision making about school choice or participation in supplemental education services as previously reported in the literature (Fusarelli, 2007). Most participants had been associated with J. E. McCaskill Elementary School for more than 1 year, and many had already explored and declined the possibility of transferring to other schools. For these parents, receiving timely information about choice was not a determinant factor in their decision. Rather, the findings of this study suggested that conflicting or confusing guidelines about supplemental education services provided by the school district and the Title I office were difficult for parents to understand, and therefore, to use in their decision making.

Moreover, this study did not find evidence of fear of change among parents as a reason to remain at a low-performing school. Rather, this study found that other fear factors existed and were common among participants. These could be identified for the purpose of future educational research as a: fear of being judged, fear of being ignored, fear of discrimination due to race or language, and fear of failure at an unfamiliar school.

The findings of this study are in contrast to Neild's (2005) pre-NCLB investigation regarding the factors that influence parental decision-making. Regarding

decisions about school choice and SES (NCLB, 2001, §6316), the parent's level of education or socio-economic status did not seem to play a major role. Participants across the economic and educational spectrum chose to remain at J. E. McCaskill Elementary. Rather, key factors such as feeling welcome, and being satisfied with teacher and school emerged from this study and supported the findings of Fusarelli (2007), Howell (2006), and Woods (1992). In this study, the factors that influenced parental decision making seemed to be affected more by the parent and child's need to belong (Glasser, 1984) at the school.

Similarly, other factors affecting school choice may be attributed to parental experiences related to race or language. For some parents, the promise of a better-performing school may have been overshadowed by prior negative or harmful experiences parents wanted to avoid for their children. One parent summed this up when she said that she did not want her son to be the only minority at "that" school.

#### *Group Dynamics*

From my job experience working with Hispanic families in schools, I have learned that for the most part, when a Hispanic family participates at school, members do so in every facet and aspect of the school as a family. Therefore, I was not surprised when small children, mothers with babies, and husbands or wives of the parent participants also came to the school at the appointed time for the FG1 and FG2 interviews. Because the majority of participants in these two groups were mothers, it was not unusual for those who came to the interviews unaccompanied to have to answer the phone to talk to their husbands or children repeatedly. For example, during the first focus group, a husband was told not to call again during the interview and was informed that he

would have to cook supper for him and the children, on his own! The mother said jokingly to the entire group, “Me va a divorciar!” (He’s going to divorce me). The other parents simply laughed. I asked her if she had to leave to attend to her family, but she replied, “No, que se aguante un rato!” (No, he can handle it for a while!). Other calls were received during the Spanish language focus group interviews, and parents had to inform their husbands or children that they were still at school or that they were almost finished.

As the interviews were underway, a few parents stopped to feed their babies, some in the room. Small children came in and out of the conference room where the interviews took place. I did my best to provide them paper, crayons, and coloring or reading books quickly. I even opened the gym for the older children and found a few basketballs for them to play with during the interviews. They came back several times to tell their mothers what they were doing and to get something to eat and drink.

Focus groups 3 and 4 were English speaking. These groups had the fewest parents (i.e., 4 and 5 parents respectively). These groups were also cultural microcosms, but different from the two Hispanic groups. After the hustle and bustle of children coming in and out, babies crying and phones ringing in the first two focus groups, I now felt as if something was missing. The interviews with the English speaking groups seemed fast, focused, and structured. Unlike the Spanish-speaking groups, English-speaking parents did not arrive with children, and no calls were received during the interviews. However, parents in all four focus groups spoke freely and shared prior experiences, views, and opinions on topic ranging from state and federal school rankings to racism.

Each group of parents interviewed for this study also had a dominant participant and their opinions often influenced the direction of the dialogue. These dominant parents became the conversational compass of their group, suggesting topics or guiding the conversation. Four general or key points can be gathered from their discussions. In Focus Group 1 (FG1), the central conversation questioned the validity of the classroom grades when the school had been deemed a low-performing school. Participants spoke at length about the differences between this American school and the schools parents attended in their home country. These parents agreed that the teachers in their home country were better than the teachers here. However, they were also quick to say that the facilities (i.e., technology, classrooms, and libraries) were better here. These parents were frustrated with the apparent inability of the school to improve its low-performing status.

In contrast, the dominant player in FG2 quickly established that J. E. McCaskill Elementary was a good school because her child was enrolled here. Other parents readily agreed. This parent reported driving 30 minutes each way so her child could attend this school. She said that she had explored her own neighborhood school as a possibility for her child, but she decided against it because there were few minority students there. She repeatedly informed the group that her child was a very successful student and that she was at this school “all the time” as a volunteer. After the meeting, another parent in this group shared that she was “annoyed” during the interview by the dominant parent who was a university graduate. This parent had not completed elementary school. The conversation in this group also was characterized by stories of negative experiences of discrimination at other schools. Participants described how they felt judged and unwelcomed at the “other” schools, perhaps because they had been associated with J. E.

McCaskill Elementary longer than any other group of parents. They had no interest in changing schools and reported having thrown away the choice letters soon after they arrived. The levels of education in this group also were the most varied. Three parents in this group had less than a middle school education. One of them had no formal schooling at all and one was a university graduate.

In the third focus group (FG3), the only female participant dominated the conversation. I knew her to be outspoken from my interactions with her prior to this study. She was an advocate for her son, and the teachers and staff knew it. I was surprised that she agreed to participate and was excited about her contributions because she could be described as someone who did not hold back. I remember when she came to our school from the north part of the district that had several very affluent schools. She became very involved with her son's education, and it took the teachers and staff a while to gain her confidence. This parent expressed "shock" when she learned about the status of the school and quickly rejected this label. She said that the neighborhood is not reflective of a low-performing school neighborhood.

This parent also guided the conversation to the area of funding. She questioned how funding was being spent in the district. She argued that more money was spent on prisons than on schools. Most of the parents agreed with her and shared their own thoughts on this subject. As a group, these parents appeared to be very analytical. The suggestion reported earlier in this study that implementing and terminating tutoring services could become a "cycle" originated within this group. They concluded: "the solution is actually the punishment." These parents placed a lot of value on the relationships with their children's teacher. They felt well informed by their teachers about

the progress of their children and reported that they wanted to volunteer at the school because they felt welcome and supported. These parents also questioned the nature of testing of diverse students for the purpose of retention or assigning a label to the school. They wondered how it was possible that diverse learners were given the same standardized test to measure growth. Tension was in the air with this group more than all other groups. They held all stakeholders accountable for the success of students. This group also wondered what would happen in the future if teen parents did not have a good education themselves. In addition, they were particularly concerned about the students who would be in third grade during the school year 2010-2011, the year students take standardized tests for the first time.

The fourth group (FG4) I called the understanding group. This group seemed to share the dominant role more than other groups. However, two main speakers could be identified. Although this group reported several instances of racism, this was a tension free group, and their conversation seemed to reflect an attitude that could be summed up as, "Oh well, their loss for saying those things." The two dominant parents offered their own experiences with racism. The rest of the parents readily agreed with them. One parent said that she came to this school trying to move away from what she said was, "a really bad school". She said that she researched the area on the Internet and found J. E. McCaskill Elementary. She reported that the communication with the teachers had been extraordinary and that she was informed for the first time that her son was gifted. She also described how brand names and other material things were not important to her and indicated that was another reason not to go to the other schools where those things seemed to be valued. The second dominant parent was among the few White parents

participating in this study. When she agreed to participate, I jokingly told her that I was glad she had accepted to participate because she would be representing the minority group in this study. She laughed and told the same anecdote during the focus group interview. Other parents made several connections to other experiences related to racism. One parent in this group chose to stay at this school because she did not want her son to be the only minority at the other school. She said:

I didn't want him to be, maybe just another African-American little boy in the class, and then everyone else is Caucasian. That was a decision that I made, and looking at the school, I did look at it, there was not, it's not, there was not a high mixture, of, of, different races.

The second dominant parent told the group that she had been approached by people she knew and that she had been questioned about why she continued to send her children to this school. She said that her son also had been approached by other children in their neighborhood about attending this school. She felt troubled when she learned that the comments made to her son were "intolerant" and told the group that she overheard this question being asked of her son: "Your school's got all those Mexicans. Are you the only White kid there?"

Although I had anticipated some issues of racism to surface during this study, I was surprised to hear the numerous accounts of feelings of discrimination or racism reported by the minority parents. They openly shared how they felt when they were at "other" schools. I was also saddened when I learned about the comments made to one of the families about White children attending J. E. McCaskill Elementary School. I had not anticipated that type of comment. I was surprised to hear that it occurred not only



between children but also directed from one White child to another White child.

Educational leaders should take note that these perspectives continue to represent a clear and present burden to many parents and students of all backgrounds.

Phenomena previously unmentioned in the research literature about school choice and supplemental education services under No Child Left Behind (2001) emerged from this study. For example, a small number of parents who chose to remain at a low-performing school allowed their elementary-age child to make the educational decision not to transfer to a better performing school. These parents reported asking their children if they wanted to transfer to another school and then deciding not to move because their children did not want to leave their friends.

It appeared that some parental needs (e.g., to belong and to be free) according to choice theory (Glasser, 1984) may be fulfilled because parents allowed their children to make educational decisions. It also seemed that when parents allowed their child to remain at a low-performing school because the child's friends attended the same school, the parents' need to belong may also have been met. As this need was met and the child was happy at this school, the parent's need to be happy may also have been met.

#### *Discussion of Themes*

The five recurring themes that emerged from this study are: belonging, parents have to do it themselves, disconnect between learning and testing, confusing information, and making suggestions. These can be linked to existing research literature because they may support or reject existing findings, or in some cases they provide new findings. The analysis appears below.

### *Belonging*

Parents in this study indicated that they belonged at J. E. McCaskill Elementary Schools because they felt happy, welcomed, and safe. Similar to Neild's (2005) findings, where in some cases parents with more education and a higher socio-economic status would make better decisions, these parents, some of them low-income parents with little or no formal education, were able to navigate the information gathering process about schools on their own or with the help of school officials or with information found online. As in Neild's study, parents in my study also chose this school because they thought it was a good school or because they felt comfortable speaking in their native language and being among other people with similar ethnic background. A contribution of this study is that some parents allowed their children to make the decision to stay at a low-performing school because the children did not want to move away from their friends even when the family lived closer to another better-performing school.

Powers and Cookson (1999) documented the dissatisfaction felt by some parents before choosing a school and the satisfaction with the new school after making the change. Parents in my study expressed similar dissatisfaction at other schools that they perceived to be true low-performing schools. Parents who had recently transferred to J. E. McCaskill Elementary expressed similar feelings of satisfaction after choosing this school as their new school. In addition, parents who had been at this school for several years, and had not experienced a change in schools, also expressed great satisfaction with the school. Although the Powers and Cookson study pre-dates No Child Left Behind (2001), their finding that choice parents tended to be more involved in their new school was supported in this study by parents who chose to remain at their school, and therefore,

became choice parents. These parents, too, were very active in the school and interacted regularly with teachers and staff. Many of them expressed being “happy” with their choice to stay at a low-performing school because it was good decision for them (Manna, 2002).

#### *Parents Have to Do it Themselves*

Neild (2005) suggested that parents tend to support, guide, and protect their children regardless of their living environment. This was very evident among these participants. Many of them described having close relationships with their students. Similarly, they reported a positive and active relationship with their child’s teacher. These parents liked to be informed and aware of what was going on in the school. This type of interaction again supported earlier findings by Powers and Cookson (1999) who found that choice parents were more actively involved with the school. Another contribution to the literature after NCLB may be that these parents held other parents accountable for the overall success of the school. Parents did not hesitate to say that the same parents “showed-up” at the same school events every time. Similarly, highly involved parents were aware of more “inside” school issues than less involved parents. For example, highly involved parents identified or knew, in their own words, who the “lazy” teachers were at this school.

#### *Disconnect between Learning and Testing*

Fusarelli (2007) and the National Governors’ Association (NGA) Report (2005) indicated that more timely information about choice and SES and more choices for parents increased the number of parents who participated in these types of programs. However, most parents in this study did not see a clear connection between what their

children learned in school as reflected in their grades and the designation of a low-performing school. In addition, many parents struggled with the understanding that SES was not for every child attending a low-performing school. Rather, families had to qualify as economically disadvantaged to receive this service. Although more choices and better information may improve the current number of parents participating in choice and SES, in this study the source of information was central. Parents questioned the validity of outsiders determining school ratings.

The post-NCLB research literature has not addressed the knowledge held by parents in the area of standardized testing (Fusarelli, 2007). This study showed that parents were very knowledgeable about how their children learned and how they were evaluated at the end of the year. They questioned students being promoted or retained based on a single test. They pointed out that students may have been ill the day of the test, and/or may have difficulties reading in the English language.

### *Confusing Information*

Timely information, as suggested by Fusarelli (2007) may not solve the conundrum of deciphering the information generated by school districts aimed at informing parents. Woods' (1992) study that pre-dates NCLB, however, provided a platform of knowledge about how schools modify their practices to retain post-choice students. Parents in my study did not share comments about being aware of changes in school practices to retain them at this school. To the contrary, J. E. McCaskill Elementary, under NCLB (2001, §6316) sanctions during this study, was reactionary to such sanctions. This study did not support Neild's (2005) findings that that some parents may be better prepared to navigate choice based on socioeconomic status. For the most

part, parents of varied backgrounds and levels of education appeared to have been able to overcome the limitations of “confusing” information being sent home. Most of these parents also said that they had researched school and program information online as well as talked with relatives, friends, and neighbors. However, some parents who allowed their elementary-age child to make to stay for social reasons invalidated this information-gathering process about schools and programs. However, this may be a way for parents to satisfy their need to be happy (Glasser, 1984) as well as their children’s needs.

#### *Parents Offer Suggestions*

Parents who were happy at this school were actively involved and communicated well with their child’s teachers. This created open lines of communication where feedback and/or suggestions were continuously exchanged. The parents in this study supported Powers and Cookson (1999) who have documented how, “Choice parents tend to be more involved in their children’s education than non-choosers” (p. 111). After hearing some suggestions about how to improve the classrooms and our school, I was surprised by the sophistication and broad scope of suggestions parents made that addressed our district and state. For example, parents suggested researching the practices of schools labeled better performing and implementing those in our school. Similarly, they questioned the state allocation of funds, and suggested the state spend more money on schools than on prisons.

#### *Implications*

##### *For Schools*

The findings of this study suggest some practical issues that school leaders may want to explore. For example, some parents in this study said that they were already

“convinced” about a certain educational issue. The concern for schools may be how to reach parents who “feel” that they do not need to be informed of something they do not want to know. All schools send information home. Schools may want to investigate and evaluate how they deliver information to parents and consider multiple delivery methods. For example, a survey of parents and students would enable school leaders to create contact lists for voicemail and email. Similarly, a parent and/or student survey would allow school leaders to measure the interest of parents about a particular issue. This study also found that some teachers shared negative comments with parents regarding the school, programs, and/or other teachers in the school. School leaders may need to remind teachers about ethical and confidential guidelines that must exist when talking to parents about other colleagues and about the inner workings of a school, and the impact on students and parents.

Leaders in schools where supplemental education services are being implemented may want to consider how to increase participation. Although bus transportation is an important factor in participation, it is not the only factor. They may need to explore how to establish common ground with their teachers in two areas. First, evaluate possible discrepancies in grades assigned by teachers at school and grades achieved by students at the end of the year (e.g., standardized tests). This possible discrepancy, for example, may reveal inflated grades among students who may actually benefit from SES. Second, teachers and administrators may want to investigate if common ground exists in the way teachers recommend tutoring services. School leaders may want to base their recommendations on different criterion (e.g., prior academic history, projected growth,

standardized tests, and classroom grades) and not solely on a teacher's opinion about student effort.

In addition, school leaders should be prepared to discuss the implications of SES with teachers to avoid misunderstandings and negative feelings. At J. E. McCaskill Elementary School, tutoring companies used teachers' classrooms and created a feeling among teachers of being "invaded". The choice provision of NCLB (2001, §6316) did not deliver as powerful and observable blow to staff morale as SES did. When schools like J. E. McCaskill entered the SES phase of sanctions under NCLB, teachers were under clear and present reminders that this process was a sanction and not just a free tutoring program for students. Leaders need to help teachers develop and implement a plan of action as they transition into SES. Faculty meetings and planning time would be appropriate times to prepare prior to the first day of tutoring. Teachers and staff should be made aware that feelings of anticipation and uncertainty about the SES process are part of the normal process of beginning SES. Leaders also could offer additional choice and SES information sessions in an attempt to better inform teachers about these sanctions.

Education leaders may benefit from regular conversations with parents about the status of the school that would inform parents beyond the contents of a generic letter or information packet. One parent in this study asked, "Are you going to have the same problems next year? Are you going to train the teachers for next year, so that they don't have the same problems?" Educational leaders should also be aware about parental concerns regarding continuity of services at the school level. As one parent said about the future of the SES program, "tutoring should be steady and continued." He reasoned that if tutoring was a sanction, then when the school was no longer a low-performing school

because tutoring had worked, tutoring would cease and, therefore, become detrimental to the school.

The success of the choice and SES provisions under No Child Left Behind (2002) depends entirely on the decisions made by parents to exercise such provisions. The findings of this study suggested that a small number of parents allowed their children to make choice and SES decisions. Therefore, the success of choice also was affected by parents who allowed their children to stay at their present school to stay close to their friends. Local school boards may want to investigate the potential benefits of providing additional parental support in the form of parenting classes or parent universities. This type of support may help parents understand that they are the authority in the home, and to regain control of the decision making power in their home. Allowing an elementary-age student to make such a decision at this early age may be a gamble with long-lasting consequences that parents may need to be better informed about.

*For the Department of Education*

The success of the supplemental educational services (SES) depended on the implementation of several components. Parents complained that lack of transportation prevented many families from participating. They questioned that a limited choice of remedial subjects was offered. They worried about the short term of tutoring services and that tutoring at a low-performing school was not offered to children who may be struggling academically, but only to those children whose parents participated in the federal free and reduced lunch program.

No Child Left Behind (2001) stipulates that schools under SES sanctions cannot provide their own SES services. However, tutoring companies were allowed to hire



teachers from the same district or schools where SES services were being provided. As a result, without informing parents, independent tutoring companies hired several teachers who were employed during the school day by J. E. McCaskill

Finally, state authorities should be aware of the level of interest generated by parents about topics such as testing, school status, and continuity of services at the school level. Some parents questioned the validity of classroom grades compared to the results published in a state report card about the school that were based on a single standardized test in reading and math. Parents also questioned the nature and purpose of standardized testing and questioned the reason why schools continue to test children using only paper and pencil tests. Participants in Focus Group Four questioned if “those people” who make standardized tests were aware that many children learned in a variety ways (i.e., visual, auditory, kinesthetic) which may affect test results. All English-speaking parents questioned how non-English speaking students were tested and wondered if those results affected the status of the school as low performing. In addition, parents questioned the discrepancy between classroom grades and the final designation the state gave the school when the state report cards were released at the end of the year. They found it odd that students could be receiving A’s and B’s at a school that ranks below that.

#### *For Universities*

Leadership programs may consider exploring the thinking processes used by parents regarding educational decisions such as school choice and supplemental education services. Findings of this study indicated that most parents identified the “need to belong” as the most important factor in their choice decision. They reasoned that when they were at this school they felt welcome, supported, happy, and successful, not judged

and demeaned. These parents concluded that they are at this school because they “belonged” here. This should be valuable information to future school leaders in graduate programs who may be struggling with low parental participation rates at their schools. Universities also may want to develop seminars that address diversity. America is a nation of cultures and cultural differences exist in every school. It is hard enough for some parents to walk in a school when they do not know the language or if they have felt judged at another school. It makes it even harder for parents if future education leaders are perceived as being part of the problem or a continuation of an existing problem.

Universities and teacher training programs may also want to evaluate how future teachers assess learning. Parents in this study expressed confusion about how grades are given and learning is measured. Teacher training programs may want to continue to invest in training teachers in areas or techniques such as Formative Assessments. Teachers may want to base their recommendations for remediation, tutoring, or supplemental education services on different criterion (e.g., prior academic history, projected growth, standardized tests, and classroom grades) and not only an educated guess based on in-house grades.

#### *For Parents and Community*

Parents in this study recognized that parental involvement was a key component in the success of their children. Parents also recognized that a productive relationship with their teacher was instrumental in the continued academic success of their students and the school. These parents recognized that teachers are individuals, and they are different from each other. Parents also indicated awareness that some teachers were better than others. The school community may be interested in knowing that all schools, in

particular a school like J. E. McCaskill Elementary, depend on the support and resources of parents and community to meet their needs. This can be accomplished through parent organizations and community volunteers.

Parents and community should also recognize that most schools have a system in place for parents and community members to participate in the direction of the school such as a school leadership team or a parent advisory board. Parents have the opportunity to express their ideas and concerns in this type of committees. During this study, members of two focus groups, FG2 and FG3, reported that some teachers were more “lazy” than others, some are more approachable than others, and some may be here only to collect a check. Parents need to continue to share this type of concerns with school leaders. Similarly, parents and community should be aware that not all teachers feel comfortable with parent volunteers and thus they need to be trained in the value of a volunteer. However, school leaders should remind teachers that the level of parental support and cooperation they receive may be directly related to their approachability based on the connections forged between teacher and student.

Parents rejected the low-performing status of the school after they investigated the status of other schools they perceived to be more or less challenging than J. E. McCaskill Elementary. Similarly, some parents also rejected the notion of this school as a low performing school based on the location of the school. These parents believed that the location of the school, in a good area in an established neighborhood of the 1970s in the east side of this city, was a good location and thus made it a good school. School leaders should keep in mind that periodic parent information nights held at differing times during the week, especially early mornings, weekends, and evenings, would allow working

parents the opportunity to come to the school to learn about a variety of topics, including testing.

Because of this study, parents should continue to hold other parents accountable for the success of their children and the success of the school. They may do this by joining their local PTO or PTA. Parents in this study were very critical of other parents who did not participate with their children at school and of parents who did not attend meetings in support of the school. These parents also criticized and worried about young uneducated parents who are now raising their own children. One focus group wondered how young parents who themselves lack education would raise and educate the next generation of children. Finally, parents need to continue to be active participants in the educational process of their children. Parents may want to regularly check their child's grades to see if they need additional support in the form of supplemental education services or remediation.

#### *Limitations*

The limitations of this study included the small number of participants. Only 22 voluntary parents were interviewed. Many of the parents in this study also participated regularly in school functions and events. They may, therefore, have been more actively involved with the school than non-participants. In addition, no parent participant, after having investigated other schools, transferred to a better school. Instead, they decided to remain at J. E. McCaskill Elementary. Although all participants were given a choice to participate in a bilingual focus group, all monolingual parents chose to participate in a focus group in their primary language. The influence of parents' self-selection regarding focus groups is unknown.

The study was conducted at one location. Although the site was the largest Title I urban elementary school in the largest school district in this southeastern state at the time this study was conducted, the study was limited to one location.

My relationship with the research site during this study was documented in Chapter 3. As mentioned earlier, I served as one of two assistant principals at J. E. McCaskill Elementary for 4 years prior to this study. My position as a school administrator may have influenced parental reaction and participation. Parents may have considered participating in this study yet declined because I was the researcher. However, it is hard to say if my position with the school negatively or positively influenced the study's results. I may have overlooked details about the site that would have been otherwise new to an outside researcher. Similarly, my understanding of the social and cultural dynamics of this school may have been affected by my position.

During the interviews, several parents used our interaction as an opportunity to inquire about their child's teacher, upcoming events, unresolved issues, and more. Parents were respectfully redirected, to the best of my ability, to maintain a sense of continuity during the interviews. Similarly, selection of focus group participants may have been affected by my ability to speak Spanish and English. Parents chose to participate in a group where their primary language would be spoken. Although all parents were given the opportunity to participate in any of the groups with a translator (i.e., Spanish to English, English to Spanish), focus groups were organized based on language. The response rate or interest in this study conducted by an outside researcher remains unknown.

### *Recommendations for Future Study*

The study examined parental perspectives and decision-making processes related to school choice and supplemental education services in a large, diverse, urban elementary school. The findings of this study indicated a need to learn more about our Hispanic parents, many of them new immigrant parents. For example, school leaders need to provide opportunities for dialogue with immigrant parents, to learn from their past experiences in schools outside the United States, to learn what influence their perception and understanding of American education. Similarly, school administrators need to learn how parents research and interpret information released by the school, the school district, and the state. Future studies need to investigate if a common heterogeneous understanding exists about the curricular expectations and academic demands for children in public schools that include the perspectives of native and immigrant parents.

This study indicated the need for future research regarding parents' choice of schools. In this study, parents entitled to choice under NCLB (2001, §6316), appeared to place more value on issues such as culture and family than on academics. This raises two important questions for additional research. First, what is the role of belonging on school choice? Second, what is the effect of the fear of change on choice? The current literature does not address concepts of belonging or change from the perspectives of parents at an elementary school. In addition, further studies are necessary to enhance the understanding the thinking, and decision-making processes of parents who chose to leave a low-performing school as designated under NCLB (2001), and then chose to return to their originating school. This study revealed that some parents had been exposed to situations

that could be perceived as judgmental, purposefully isolating, and exclusionary, based on ethnicity and language. Therefore, further studies are needed to understand the role discrimination plays on school choice decisions.

Further explorations of parental perspectives and decision-making processes about schools may yield a better understanding of the term *racism*. Furthermore, future studies may reveal if a common understanding of racism or discrimination exists among all parents (i.e., Black, Hispanic, and White). During this study, Hispanic parents did not have the opportunity to hear or react to derogatory or pejorative comments that had been shared in other focus groups such as, "...that school is full of Mexicans." Future studies may yield a richer conversation and better understanding of this recurring problem. Similarly, further studies about school choice may yield a better understanding of how English-speaking parents react to comparisons of the U.S. educational system to other educational systems in Mexico and other Spanish-speaking countries. English speaking parents in this study did not have the opportunity to hear or react to comments made by Spanish-speaking parents when they compared the educational system in this district to the one from their country of origin and concluded that schools in their native country are better than those in the United States. School choice and supplemental education services are complex topics that will need continued examination especially after the reauthorization of NCLB.

Moreover, a longitudinal study could explore the "cycle," as one parent called it, created when sanctioned schools provide supplemental education services but emerge from sanctions under NCLB (2001) when the school achieves Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). School leaders would benefit from knowing more about the perspectives and

resourcefulness of parents whose child struggles academically in a low-performing school, but does not qualify for tutoring services under the current guidelines of participation in SES. Participants in this study were particularly worried about the educational progress and success of students who entered Kindergarten at the time of this study, and who would be tested by this state's Department of Public Instruction in their third grade or during the school year 2010–2011.

In addition, a replication of this study that includes all Title I schools in a district or state may provide additional data. Similarly, a study of the perspectives and decision making processes about school choice of parents whose children attend better performing schools could advance our understanding of what defines a good school and good teachers among non-Title I parents. Moreover, a study of parental perspectives and decision-making processes in a better-performing school may enhance our understanding about parental needs (i.e., need to survive, to belong, to gain power, to be free, and to have fun) in that type of school (Glasser, 1984).

Finally, in this study some parents indicated that their children did not want to move to a better-performing school because they did not want to leave their friends. Future studies could investigate children's thinking about school choice and supplemental education services. This type study could investigate how elementary-age children feel about changing schools, going to a better-performing school, and enrolling in tutoring classes.



### *Epilogue*

I began this study with the observation that public schools face many current challenges. Public schools are a manifestation of the society they serve, and the challenges faced by public schools may vary according to factors such as the location, size, culture, student population, teacher effectiveness, district and state leadership, and community and parental involvement and support. J. E. McCaskill Elementary continues to face the challenges of an inner city school including low parental support, high (almost 90%) participation in free breakfast and lunch, and indication of poverty. The school is still considered a minority school, predominantly Black and Hispanic. The economy over the last couple of years further endangered the already fragile high-poverty and crime-ridden area this school serves. Although the issues affecting this school may be different from those affecting a predominantly White, middle class, suburban school, every day children walk through the doors of McCaskill Elementary looking for a safe haven where learning can take place.

It has been almost 2 years since I was an administrator at this school. I have stopped by to visit on a couple of occasions to see friends. I still get together occasionally with former office staff and a couple of teachers at a monthly breakfast club. Through these meetings, I have learned that many things have changed including the principal, who retired the same year I left this school. The new principal also has since retired. A third principal was named only a month ago, but I have not had the opportunity to meet her. The assistant principal was moved to another school a year ago, and was replaced by a new assistant principal. Budget reductions eliminated my position was when I left, so

the school is now served by one principal and one assistant principal. I cannot imagine how the administration handles the school with fewer staff. The office manager retired and a new voice answers the phone when I call the school. I did not recognize several teachers the last time I visited. I do not know where many of my former colleagues are. During one of my visits, a few children looked twice when I walked down the hallway. Many of them still remember me, and I remember them.

The school made adequate yearly progress (AYP) last year so no additional sanctions were applied. If the school makes AYP this year, it will come out from under SES sanctions. It remains to be seen if the cycle predicted by the study participants, will begin. Little has changed in that area, participation in SES continue be low. Although the participation rate in both choice and SES is almost the same as when this study was conducted, the district now offers afterschool bus transportation. Unfortunately, SES is now limited only to grades 3 and 5 because more schools in this district are now under sanctions and the district must pay companies to offer SES to more students in more schools.

Most parents who participated in this study are no longer at this school. Their children have moved on to middle school, and inevitably, the parents moved with their children. I do not know if the Hispanic parent who participated in the first focus group and who left this school shortly after ever returned to this school. Student enrollment continues to be high. Close to a thousand students still attend J. E. McCaskill Elementary, which remains the largest federally funded elementary school in the largest school district in this southeastern state. The school continues under choice and supplemental education services sanctions.

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## APPENDIX A

## Invitation to Participate in Study – Spanish

13 de Marzo, 2008

Estimados Padres,

Quiero invitarlos a tomar parte en un proyecto de investigación que estaré realizando en nuestra escuela. Estoy interesado en averiguar lo que ustedes piensan acerca de la elección de escuelas llamada “choice,” y aprender más acerca de cómo va todo en nuestra escuela. Espero tener varios padres voluntarios en este estudio que no esta relacionado con nuestra escuela, pero con mis propios cursos como estudiante a nivel de Doctorado en Educacion en la Universidad Estatal Appalachian.

**La participación en este estudio es estrictamente voluntaria** y toda la información compartida conmigo será confidencial. Este estudio esta limitado a padres solamente, asi que su niño(a) no tomara parte. Espero hablar con padres individualmente y/o en un pequeño grupo.

Sus pensamientos y opiniones son importantes para mí porque pueden ayudar a nuestra escuela a comunicarnos mejor con los padres. Para los padres que puedan participar, refrescos y bocadillos serán proporcionados despues de las entrevistas. Gracias para su consideracion de tomar parte en este proyecto.

Sinceremente,

Sr. David Fonseca

-----  
 Por favor indique **SI** o **NO** y regrese esta forma a la escuela

\_\_\_\_\_ **Si, estamos interesados en hablar con Mr. Fonseca acerca de este proyecto.**

**Por favor contactenos al siguiente numero de telefono \_\_\_\_\_, y  
 pregunten por, \_\_\_\_\_.**  
 (Nombre de los padres solamente)

**Con un circulo: Mi estudiante esta en 3<sup>er</sup> grado      4<sup>o</sup> grado      5<sup>o</sup> grado**

\_\_\_\_\_ No, no estamos interesados en participar en este proyecto. Gracias.

**POR FAVOR REGRESEN ESTA FORMA A LA MAESTRA(O) DE SU ESTUDIANTE  
 (En el sobre con el nombre de Mr. Fonseca).**

APPENDIX B  
Invitation to Participate in Study - English

March 13, 2008

Dear Parents,

I'd like to invite you to participate in a research project that I will be conducting at our school. I am interested in finding out what you think about school "choice", so I can learn more about how our school is doing. I am hoping to have several parents volunteer in this study that is not related to our school, but my own continuing education as a Doctoral student at Appalachian State University.

**Participation in this study is strictly voluntary** and all information shared with me will be confidential. This study is limited to parents only and your child will not be involved. I am hoping to talk with parents individually and/or in a small group.

Your thoughts and opinions are important to me because they may help our school communicate better with parents. For parents who are able to participate, refreshments will be provided following the interviews. Thank you for considering participating in this project.

Sincerely,

Mr. David Fonseca

Please check **YES** or **NO** and return to school

**Yes, I am interested in talking with Mr. Fonseca about this project.**

**Please contact me at the following telephone number \_\_\_\_\_, and ask for, \_\_\_\_\_.**  
(Parent's name only)

**Circle one: My child is in    3<sup>rd</sup> grade        4<sup>th</sup> grade        5<sup>th</sup> grade**

No, I am not interested in participating in this project. Thank you.

**PLEASE RETURN THIS FORM TO YOUR CHILD'S TEACHER  
(IN THE ENVELOP ADDRESSED TO MR. FONSECA).**

APPENDIX C  
Survey - English

**Parental Perspectives in Decision Making Regarding School Choice and Supplemental Education Services Under No Child Left Behind in an Urban Elementary School.**

Demographics Questionnaire

Participant's number: \_\_\_\_\_ (Please do not write your name on these pages)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please choose and circle the answer that best describes you*

1. My gender

- a. Female                      b. Male

2. My race

- a. Black                      b. White                      c. Hispanic                      d. Asian  
e. Other

3. My age

- a. 25-30                      b. 30-35                      c. 35-40                      d. 40-4  
e. over 45

4. My education

- a. elementary                      b. middle                      c. high school                      d. comm.  
college                      e. 4 yr. college

5. My profession

- a. technical                      b. manufacturing                      c. construction                      d. stay  
at home                      e. other: \_\_\_\_\_

6. My yearly income
- a. \$0.00                      b. \$10,000 – 20,000    c. \$20,000-30,000    d. \$30,000-40,000    e. over \$40,000
7. My household
- a. single parent    b. two parent home    c. I'm a guardian    d. I'm a grandparent    e. other: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Number of children in the home
- a. 1                              b. 2                              c. 3                              d. 4
- e. more than 4
9. Total number of people living in my home
- a. 2                              b. 3                              c. 4                              d. 5
- e. more than 6
10. Total number of years I have been affiliated with this school
- a. 2                              b. 3                              c. 4                              d. 5
- e. more than 6

***Please answer the following questions***

1. Have you heard of the education act known as No Child Left Behind?
2. Have you heard of the yearly academic progress schools must make? (This is also known as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP))
3. What does *school choice* mean to you?

4. Did you know that tutoring is offered to schools labeled “low performing”? Did you enroll your child in tutoring? If not, please explain.

5. What is your understanding of a low-performing school?

APPENDIX D  
Survey - Spanish

**Perspectivas de los Padres en una Escuela Primaria Urbana al Tomar Decisiones con Respecto a la Opciones de Escuela y Servicios Suplementarios de Educacion Bajo la Ley Educativa Ningun Niño Se Queda Atras (NCLB).**

Questionario Demografico

Numero del Participante: \_\_\_\_\_ (Por favor no escriba su nombre en esta pagina)

Fecha: \_\_\_\_\_

*Por favor escoja y marque con un circulo la respuesta que mejor describa a usted*

1. Mi sexo

a. Femenino

b. Masculino

2. Mi etnicidad

a. De Color

b. Blanco

c. Hispano

d.

Asiatico

e. Otro

3. Mi edad

a. 25-30

b. 30-35

c. 35-40

d. 40-45

e. over 45

4. Mi educacion

a. elementaria

b. secundaria

c. preparatoria

d. Esc.

Tecnica

e. Universidad

5. Mi profesion

a. tecnica

b. manufactura

c. construccion

d. hogar

e. otro: \_\_\_\_\_

6. Mi salario anual
- a. \$0.00                      b. 10,000 – 20,000                      c. 20,000-30,000                      d. 30,000-40,000                      e. mas de 40,000
7. Mi hogar
- a. padre soltero                      b. casado                      c. Guardian                      d. Abuelo(a)
- e. otro: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Numero de niños en el hogar
- a. 1                                      b. 2                                      c. 3                                      d. 4
- e. mas de 4
9. Numero total de personas que viven en mi hogar
- a. 2                                      b. 3                                      c. 4                                      d. 5
- e. mas de 6
10. Numero total de años que yo he estado afiliado con esta escuela
- a. 2                                      b. 3                                      c. 4                                      d. 5
- e. mas de 6

***Por favor conteste las siguientes preguntas***

1. ¿Ha escuchado de la ley educativa llamada No Child Left Behind o en Español “Ningun Niño se Quedara Atras”?
2. ¿Ha escuchado acerca del progreso academico anual que las escuelas tienen que hacer? (Este progreso academico se conoce tambien como “Progreso Academico Annual” o AYP en Ingles.





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