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Criteria Formulating School Choice Decisions For A Middle School Parent Population

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CRITERIA FORMULATING SCHOOL CHOICE DECISIONS FOR A MIDDLE SCHOOL PARENT POPULATION

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To an array of colleagues and students from the last twenty-nine years. From

Fontana, to Milltown, to Metuchen and Denver; then Montclair; you unwittingly

taught me. You certainly were my inspiration.

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CHAPTER I

The Problem

In response to continued criticism of the nation's public school system by politicians, the general public, parents and educators, appointed policymakers, together with their constituencies, have devised modern school reforms that seem to be both educationally sound and politically attractive. One of the most highly touted improvements plans, school choice, provides an increased level of consumer selection at public expense. The enhanced opportunities for customer choice ostensibly shift power to parents, thereby bringing new voices into the educational decision making process and exposing an overly bureaucratized system of education to some form of market discipline.

School choice offers parents the opportunity to select a public or private school, or an alternative program, through designs using tax credits, vouchers, magnet programs or open enrollments without reference to their place of residency. Parents with school choice options acquire varying degrees of discretion about which schools their children can attend depending on the specifics of the school choice program available to them.

The intent of most school choice programs throughout the country is to provide affordable options among desirable schools to those who currently do not feel they enjoy such alternatives. School choice is an attempt to address issues of cultural pluralism and diversity in educational values and philosophies (Howe, 1997). Researchers and policymakers alike suggest school choice can play a

significant role in enhancing the efficiency of the educational enterprise through improved student achievement (Elmore, 1990). That expectation, of improved student achievement, in particular forms the underpinnings of school choice as a reform strategy. However, policymakers are aware of the social consequences of school choice and have tried to design policies that are socially just (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1994).

Despite theoretical possibilities, the implementation of school choice has not been without controversy. Critics of school choice fear that offering parents extended options will weaken the social cohesion of communities and increase racial and class polarization (Bhagavan, 1996). When school choice options include private schools, some worry that public schools will receive even less financial support and consequently continue to decline (Bennett, 1989). Others argue that school choice options are most likely to be exercised by privileged persons and eventually the more popular schools will be able to choose students (Bastian, 1989). All this would lead to greater stratification based on socioeconomic and racial characteristics, and academic ability (Bhagavan, 1996). Certain researchers even believe that school choice, rather than promoting innovation and reform, will render education more unresponsive as popular schools tailor curriculum to ensure a dependable clientele (Astin, 1992).

Regardless of the contentions of the debate, school choice initiatives continue to advance and they or their offshoots undoubtedly will reconfigure traditional school design. School choice however is only an umbrella term, not a

singular, discrete plan. As legions of school choice options have unfolded in communities throughout the nation, they arise from highly diverse structural and contextual designs. These school choice plans cannot easily be contained in any one proposal, definition or format. Each one varies somewhat, shaped by the needs of the community where it was conceived. All school choice plans notwithstanding do impart unique occasions for consumer preference. That reality, of consumer preference, is paramount to the focus of this study.

This study concentrated on those extended opportunities for customer selection and focused on specific consumer exigencies arising from the augmented school choice opportunities. In light of the many school choice options now available and those options which are emerging, who is doing the choosing? Why do parents make the choices they do? How do parents exercise the new levels of discretion which school choice affords? Specifically, what criteria do parents use to formulate that preference?

Already school choice, and the added alternatives presented, have changed substantially the organizational patterns through which we have sustained education. School choice has re-defined interactions and partially transformed accountabilities within the educational process, fashioning a much larger and more complex role for parents (Lines, 1993). Distinct, and perhaps unaccustomed responsibilities, regarding education now confront parents with school choice options. Previously, for most parents, the geographic boundaries of their neighborhood directed school attendance zones, specifically neighborhood schools.

For many parents, the selection and subsequent purchase of a home revolved around determining the best public school in the area.

Suddenly, we anticipate that parents with particular degrees of clarity, judgment and intent will make decisions about which school most closely meets the needs, interests or learning style of their child. Which school, conceivably among several, should their child attend? How do parents make that decision? What measures do they use? Do choosing parents use differing parameters to make that choice? If so, are there patterns, relationships or contrasts evident between implicit criteria and choosing parents? Will the population selected for this study display characteristics typically ascribed to choosing populations examined elsewhere or will there be differences?

Ultimately, in extolling school choice as a reform instrument, much of what policymakers have forecasted about enhanced educational excellence is contingent on the competition that school choice promotes (Yanofsky & Young, 1992). Policymakers recognize that the single most critical factor to the success of school choice exists within the decisions parents manifest. If parents value high achievement, effectiveness or innovation, and exercise the newly acquired consumer choice toward achieving those ends and matching their child's needs to schools offering those alternatives, an alleged monopolistic stranglehold of mediocrity on education will break, reform will result, and public education will again command some analogous degree of support (Norquist, 1996).

Conversely, critics have countered that parents choose schools for many reasons that are unrelated to the effectiveness of the school (Alves, 1983). Furthermore, there are concerns that those choosing come disproportionally from higher-income, better educated classes (Martinez, Thomas & Kemerer, 1994), and that lower-income, less educated or minority and non-English speaking parents are essentially excluded from the school choice process (Levin, 1990). The harshest criticism alleges that school choice is predominately the domain of academically exceptional or economically privileged students whose families seek the semblance of a private school education at public expense (Chase, 1999). Will these and other theoretical conjectures highlighted in current literature be demonstrated by this population or will other conclusions result?

Background and Setting for the Study

The location for this study was Montclair, New Jersey. Montclair is a suburban/urban, mostly residential community in the northeastern county of Essex, twenty minutes from either Manhattan or Newark. Many professional residents commute to New York City or Newark daily. Montclair residents represent a wide range of socioeconomic, racial and ethnic backgrounds. Starting with articles in New York Magazine (Sharply, 1988), Esquire (Shapiro, 1988), and continuing throughout recent features in the New Jersey Monthly (1999, March), and New Jersey Reporter (1996, November/December), Montclair is described as one of the "hot" suburbs in the tri-state area, attracting those who desire the advantages of suburban life combined with the amenities of an urban area. The New York

Times Magazine (Funderburg, 1999), moreover characterized Montclair as a community, while still under construction, "addressing racial diversity like no other town in America."

The town is approximately four miles long north to south, and one and a half miles wide west to east. It supports a population of 36,313. The racial composition for Montclair remains roughly 30 % Black and 65 % White (Funderburg, 1999). The public school system affords all parents "Freedom of Choice" through a controlled choice, magnet school design. Montclair has seven elementary schools, three middle schools and only one high school. One of the middle schools, the Renaissance School, and a collective parent population who chose that magnet, provided the focal point for this study.

From the formalized beginnings of the district in 1887, Montclair exhibited an opportunity for educational options, but only for some. Even when the New Jersey Constitution outlawed segregation of schools in 1947, not much changed in Montclair (Civil Rights Audit, 1947). School choice continued for economically advantaged families by way of home purchase. If not through residence selection, school choice became the franchise only for those who were particularly well informed or well connected. During the 1950s (Manners, 1998), far more White families than Black families who lived in the southeast sector of Montclair which was predominately Black, did send their children to schools in "optional areas," or those which were predominately White. Montclair's focused commitment toward

eradicating segregation and offering educational options to all came somewhat later.

As forced desegregation commenced in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s all over the nation, school choice offered districts a plan for voluntary integration. Districts like Montclair, viewed school choice, particularly magnet schools, as an avenue for escaping the possible wholesale migration of Whites while simultaneously complying with court mandates (Armor and Coleman, 1972). School choice would afford all parents options within the public sector and subsequently, except within large, urban areas (Manners, 1998), the anticipated migration never substantially materialized. After seven failed attempts at desegregation, including a plan for forced busing, a formalized plan of school choice became the integration strategy for Montclair.

Faced with direct orders to desegregate their school system, notwithstanding the expanding unrest from Whites and their declining support of the public schools, Montclair initiated a limited magnet structure with controlled school choice in the 1977-1978 academic year under superintendent, Walter Marks. Considered an intradistrict plan since students could only select public schools within Montclair, that action finally addressed the New Jersey Education Commissioner's mandates requiring desegregation and ended an almost ten year period of scrutiny, rulings and monitoring by the state (Manners, 1998). Mary Lee Fitzgerald, Walter Marks' successor as superintendent, amplified the magnet school program in Montclair during her tenure as superintendent of schools in the

1980s. Most conspicuously, in 1984, she eliminated all remaining neighborhood schools, making all the public schools in Montclair magnets. At the time, Montclair was the only district in New Jersey offering such a configuration and among but a few within the United States. There have been other modifications and organizational changes to the original Montclair school choice plan implemented in 1977, the most recent being, the opening of the Renaissance Middle School. The Renaissance School offered a bold, original implementation of magnet choice, differing substantially from Mount Hebron Middle School, the science and technology magnet or Glenfield Middle School, the gifted and talented magnet.

The magnet structure with a controlled choice adaptation, arguably futuristic at the time of its inception, but not when contrasted with current school choice implementations elsewhere, still defines how school choice works in Montclair today. Unlike a similar plan in Boston, Montclair's magnet school system has remained largely undisputed over the years (Funderburg, 1999). Magnets like those inaugurated in Montclair, though first used to desegregate schools, now subscribe to collateral goals. After a 23 year history of school choice, offering options in Montclair now proceeds from additional objectives about, and notions directed toward, a continued commitment to individual liberty, and also subscribes to the idea about "best fit" for individual students (Raywid, 1989).

Many researchers believe that no single school can best meet the individual needs of every student (Wise & Darling-Hammond, 1982). School choice compliments that desire to find suitability. Additionally, support is growing for the idea that parents can provide some precision in selecting and structuring the "fit" of their child's education through school choice (Wise & Darling-Hammond, 1982). Implicit in the debate over school choice is also a sentiment that the competition, resulting from expanded school choice, will encourage overall excellence throughout a school system.

Opening the Renaissance School in 1997 further expanded school choice options in Montclair for parents with children at the middle school level. The school choice options offered Montclair families blended the diversity afforded by magnets with the equality of opportunity and access guaranteed in controlled choice. Alternate guiding principles about pedagogy and current theories respecting how children learn and how we judge the worth of that acquired knowledge guided the development of the Renaissance School (Anand, 1999).

All magnet choices in Montclair today must comply with guidelines for pre-determined racial ceilings or goals for the district as a whole; it is a form of controlled choice. Estimates are that between 13 % to 15 % of Montclair's school age children attend private school. The rest, the present public school population of 6,040 students, represents an enrollment increase of 111 students over the 1998-1999 academic year (1999-2000 Budget Report, 1999). Over half of that

public school population comprises minority students. Current ethnic breakdowns

for the public school population, reported as percentages, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Ethnic Distribution in Montclair Public Schools

Afro-American	White	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific
49.4 %	42.3 %	4.8 %	3.4 %

Note. From Memo, March 9, 1999

Each school within the district must meet this same racial composition within its

own population as they grant admission to students. If space is available and racial

balance is maintained, families obtain their first choice of schools.

In Montclair, parents can file Freedom of Choice documents designating a

first and second preference. They must file documents for an upcoming year

before March 1, guaranteeing notice by July 1. Most parents, however, receive

notification regarding the application for their child before the end of the school

year. Preference is given to siblings of children already attending an elected

school. Families denied their first choice in a given year, may re-apply the

following year with preferred status. Not all families select Freedom of Choice,

deciding instead to follow natural magnet feeder patterns traditionally established

throughout the district.

Transportation is provided to Montclair students under varying guidelines.

Middle school students who reside one and a half miles or more away from their

school can ride the bus. Those students living between one and one and a half miles from their school receive transportation if space is available. Access to space-availability changes from year to year and is not guaranteed for any subsequent year once granted.

The data presented in Table 2, taken from the <u>New Jersey Comparative Spending Guide</u> published in March 1998 and the 1997-1998 <u>New Jersey School Report Card</u> (Montclair Public Schools), gives other information about the Montclair Public Schools. Both reports individually compile data on school districts in New Jersey with enrollments over 3,501 students. District Factor Group (DFG) is an arbitrary indicator assigned to school districts in New Jersey reflecting the socioeconomic status of the citizens composing individual school districts.

Table 2

<u>Facts on Montclair Public Schools</u>

<u>% Classified Students</u>	<u>Student/Teacher Ratio</u>	<u>District Factor Group</u>	<u>Cost Per Pupil</u>	<u>Current Budget Allocation</u>
12.8	13.8 : 1	G-H	$8,128 [a]	$60,571,484

<u>Note.</u> [a]The current cost per pupil in Essex county is $8,206. The amount of the Montclair expenditure ranks 34 out of the 84 schools reviewed.

Consistent with other districts throughout the state, Montclair experienced a sharp rise in expenditures over the last ten to twelve years. Due to these

escalating costs and a retrenchment of state and federal funds, the township's portion the school budget has risen from 70 % to 82 % (Memo, March 9, 1999).

In January of 1999, the Montclair Public Schools was awarded a $1.5 million, three year, renewable, federal grant to continue efforts promoting diversity within the school system ("Montclair Gets," 1999). Instructed that race alone can no longer be used exclusively in the admission and selection process, Montclair is now examining a series of race neutral factors to refashion that admission process (Memo, March 9, 1999). The district is also investigating strategies for narrowing the acknowledged achievement gap between White and non-White students.

Additionally, since much of the information depicting a school district's progress toward meeting current New Jersey's academic standards relies on data from the culminating public school experience, high school, Tables 3-10 give the latest published information about Montclair High School and the Class of 1998. The data is selected and summarized from the 1997-1998 New Jersey School Report Card (Montclair High School). Note that while High School Proficiency Test (HSPT) scores are therein reported, the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) has subsequently become the standard determining high school graduation.

Table 3

Facts on Montclair High School--Chart A

Dropout Rate

(Percent of students in grades 9-12 who drop out during the year)

	Montclair High	State Average
1997-1998	0.2 %	3.8 %

Table 4

Facts on Montclair High School--Chart B

High School Proficiency Test -- Grade 11

(Percent of students passing each section of HSPT11 and overall HSPT11)

1997-1998	Reading	Mathematics	Writing	HSPT (All Sections)
Montclair	83.5 %	86.9 %	87.6 %	75.2 %
DFG	92.3 %	94.1 %	94.3 %	86.8 %
State Average	84.0 %	85.9 %	87.9 %	75.3 %

Table 5

Facts on Montclair High School--Chart C

Scholastic Assessment Test Results

(All SAT results based on recentered scale instituted in 1995 by Educational Testing Service - ETS)

1997-1998	Students Taking Test		Mathematics	Verbal
	#	%	Average Score	Average Score
Montclair	252	74 %	520	520
DFG	9,589	81 %	536	518
State Average	49,861	75 %	511	495

Table 6

Facts on Montclair High School--Chart D

Advanced Placement Results

(All AP results are based on information from Educational Testing Service - ETS)

1997-1998	# of Students In Classes[a]	# Students Taking Exam[b]	# Students Scoring 3 or Better[c]
	413	171	146

Note. [a]16 different AP classes offered

[b]Students need not be enrolled in AP class to take exam

[c]Scores of 3 or better allow for varying degrees of college credit

Table 7

Facts on Montclair High School--Chart E

Class of 1998 Enrollment History

(Figures provide the number of students enrolled at each October reporting during 4 years of high school)

	Grade 9 (94-95)	Grade 10 (95-96)	Grade 11 (96-97)	Grade 12 (97-98)
1998 Senior Class	394.0	375.0	343.5[a]	339.0

Note. [a]Shared-time students are counted as one-half, 0.5, at each school

Table 8

Facts on Montclair High School-- Chart F

Graduation Data

(Students graduating by August as a percentage of the Grade 12 enrollment)

	Montclair	DFG	State Average
Class of 1998	95.3 %	100.4 %	102.3 %

Table 9

Facts on Montclair High School--Chart G

Graduation Types for Class of 1998

(Percentage of students satisfying state requirements through differing means)

	Graduated Passed HSPT	Graduated via SRA process[a]	Graduated via LEP[b]	Graduated exempt HSPT
Montclair	70.6 %	5.6 %	0.9 %	20.4 %
DFG	91.1 %	2.6 %	0.1 %	6.2 %
State Average	86.1 %	5.7 %	0.8 %	7.4 %

Note. [a]Special Review Assessment (alternative assessment)

[b]Limited English Proficiency designation

Table 10

Facts on Montclair High School--Chart H

Post Graduation Plans	
(Percentage of graduating seniors pursuing various self-reported post high school plans)	
Intended Pursuits	Class of 1998[a]
4 year College/University	75 %
2 year College	7 %
Other College	1 %
Other Post Secondary School	8 %
Military	0 %
Full-Time Employment	10 %
Unemployed	0 %
Other	0 %
Undecided/Status Unknown	-1 %

Note. [a]Percents may not add up to 100 % due to changes in post-graduation destinations that are consistent with the N J State Department of Education's Fall Survey data

Renaissance Opens

The newest school choice option in Montclair, the Renaissance Middle School, opened its doors in September of 1997. Unlike the two other magnet middle schools in the district, the Renaissance School has no natural feeders. At the Renaissance School, most students are enrolled because their parents deliberately chose the Renaissance School although a few students are assigned. That makes the Renaissance School unique in the district and explains, partially,

the rationale for selecting that choosing population of parents for study. In their 1996 book, <u>Who Chooses? Who Loses?,</u> Elmore and Fuller underscored their own convictions toward the success of school choice implementations. Presently, Elmore and Fuller point out, school choice if offered in a school district, is optional. They hold school choice should be universal, requiring all parents to choose. The Renaissance School reflects that predilection for required choice and facilitated the study of a selecting entity unparalleled in the district.

The Renaissance School magnet is a small, community based school housed in a building rented from, and shared with the Immaculate Conception Church and High School. The property is located one block off a main thoroughfare, Bloomfield Avenue, on Park Street. The Renaissance School begins at 8:20 a.m. and has an extended day program which concludes at 4:05 p.m. Glenfield and Mount Hebron, the other two middle school magnets within the district, which begin the school day at 7:50 a.m., dismiss students at 2:09 p.m. Several commercial sites in downtown Montclair, under contract with the Board of Education, serve as art, dance and physical education classrooms for the Renaissance School. The Montclair Public Library supplements the school's research needs. Community facilities like the Montclair Art Museum, the YMCA, Ashley-Hammond's Soccer Dome and Sharron Miller's Dance Studio are not only instructional sites for the school, the community at large provides vast opportunities for the service learning module required of all Renaissance School students.

When the Renaissance School opened in 1997, it had only 76 sixth graders. In the fall of 1998, those sixth graders proceeded to seventh grade and a new sixth grade formed. With the school term commencing in the fall 1999, seventh graders advanced to eighth grade, sixth to seventh and the newest sixth grade class was assembled, bringing the Renaissance School to current, full complement with 223 students. Thematic, interdisciplinary units taught around block scheduling characterize the school's curriculum. As the name Renaissance connotes, students at the Renaissance School work through an assortment of units, projects and activities which demonstrate ability within numerous and diverse academic disciplines. Expectations at the Renaissance School are that learning is a constant and standards are exceeded. At the Renaissance School, assessment of student progress proceeds through electronically maintained portfolios.

Tables 11-15 give additional facts about the Renaissance School.

Table 11

Facts About Renaissance School--Chart A

Language Diversity

First language spoken at home in order of frequency.

English 87 %	Bengali 1 %	Hebrew 1 %
Spanish 7 %	French 1 %	Hindi 1 %
Polish 1 %		Others 1 %

Percent of Limited English Proficient (LEP) 0 %

Note. From New Jersey School Report Card (Renaissance), 1997-1998

Table 12

Facts About Renaissance School--Chart B

Attendance Rate (% per day)	Average Class Size	Student Mobility Rate	Student /Faculty Ratio	Faculty Attendance (% per day)
96.6 %	25.0	2.6 %	20.5 : 1	99.1 %

Note. From New Jersey School Report Card (Renaissance), 1997-1998

Table 13

Facts About Renaissance School--Chart C

Administrator/ Student Ratio	Academic Degrees of Staff		Length of School Day	Instructional Time Daily
152.0 : 1.0[a]	BA/BS	20 %	7 hours : 45 minutes	6 hours : 55 minutes
	MA/MS	60 %		
	Ed D/Ph D	20 %		

Note. From New Jersey School Report Card, Renaissance, 1997-1998

[a]Teaching Principal

Table 14

Facts About Renaissance School--Chart D

Standardized Assessment Results[a]

Metropolitan Achievement Tests

(Only Stanines Represented)

Current 8th grade, graduating June 2000

1997-1998 Results	1998-1999 Results
Grade 6 Total Battery: 7	Grade 7 Total Battery: 7
(Form S, 65 tested)	(Form S, 63 tested)
Reading Total: 7	Reading Total: 7
Vocabulary: 7	Vocabulary: 7
Reading Comprehension: 6	Reading Comprehension: 7
Math Total: 7	Math Total: 7
Concepts/Problem Solving: 7	Concepts/Problem Solving: 7
Procedures: 6	Procedures: 5
Language Total: 7	Language Total: 7
Prewriting: 6	Prewriting: 6
Composing: 7	Composing: 7
Editing: 7	Editing: 7

Note. [a]Not yet in publication, summarized through school records

Table 15

Facts About Renaissance School--Chart E

Standardized Assessment Results[a]

Metropolitan Achievement Tests

(Only Stanines Represented)

Current 7th grade, graduating June 2001

1997-1998 Results	1998-1999 Results
	Grade 6 Total Battery: 7
	(Form S, 71 tested)
	Reading Total: 7
NO DATA AVAILABLE	Vocabulary: 7
	Reading Comprehension: 6
	Math Total: 7
STUDENTS NOT YET	Concepts/Problem Solving: 7
ENROLLED AT RENAISSANCE	Procedures: 6
	Language Total: 7
	Prewriting: 7
	Composing: 7
	Editing: 6

Note. [a]Not yet in publication, summarized through school records.

Significance of the Study

School choice has already re-defined the traditional boundaries characterizing public education sites. The organization and governance configurations supporting the nation's current educational system may bear slight resemblance to those formulated for the twenty-first century as school choice implementations or other initiatives continue. Examining the criteria used by parents within the school choice process may point toward additional structures, programs and policy decisions needed to fine-tune the process of choosing. Conceivably, the same examination can assist in predicting and then facilitating the changing school environment of the 21st century. While many critics of public education call for reforms, some say education in the United States must be re-invented totally (Hill, 1993; Wagner, 1996). Will reinvention ultimately be the alternative for policymakers and administrators? What new understandings about educational re-invention or reform can this study about parent choice illuminate?

Additionally, anytime the tide for reform rises, there is a collateral need for new understandings and resources to assist in that reformation. Unfortunately, all too often, reforms are long in coming and improvement attempts often are abandoned either before they are fully realized or affiliated knowledge to assess them is acquired. If school choice is indeed a possible avenue for reform within our public education system, we need to understand its impact and how it may transform current circumstances. The expectation is that this study can broaden

the base of research and knowledge about the consequences and other aspects of school choice.

Most importantly, understanding the pivotal position parent selection plays in the process of school choice may suggest refashioning essential, cooperative roles for administrators, supervisors and school leadership teams within that school choice process. If we anticipate, and ultimately come to expect, that parents will make informed decisions regarding school selection for their children, how do parents gain the skills necessary to make an informed decision? Can professionals expedite the process of school choice by in some way heightening that capacity for parents, or is that province outside the school realm of authorization? Furthermore, should schools, operating as many other enterprises customarily do, market their organization and product or instead focus only on discharge and delivery?

Organization of the Study

The researcher's pilot study, completed in the fall of 1998, probed the initial informational gathering aspects of the school choice process, including the selection criteria used, for the families of nine Afro-American females who were enrolled at the time as sixth graders at the Renaissance School. Preliminary findings from that limited, independent examination, engendered and re-directed the current analysis. It also should be noted that the nine families involved in the pilot now form a portion of the larger population selected for the current investigation. While the decision to include those nine families may be viewed as a

possible source of bias, the researcher's determination was that this group is no more or less tainted by prior association than the larger population now selected for study (See Assumptions and Limitations, Chapter I, pages 32-34).

This descriptive case study began in the winter of 2000, the third year of operation for the Renaissance School. The study population encompassed the Renaissance School parents first identified by student name on current class rosters and then matched to existing Freedom of Choice documents. Identified parents selected and gained admission to the Renaissance School the year their child entered sixth grade by filing a Freedom of Choice form. Those selecting the Renaissance School as a first choice, but denied admission were excluded. Likewise, the research eliminated the few families assigned to the Renaissance School either because they expressed no preference or were denied their first selection. The small number of families who have left the Renaissance School, no matter what the reason, and those that joined a specific class section subsequent to its initial formation (See Table 12) were also excluded from this study.

Using archival records and documents from the Montclair Public Schools and the Renaissance School, both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered to identify and characterize defining aspects (demographic data) for the sample population of choosing parents; who were they? While the principle units of analysis remained the parents and the criteria they used in making their school choice decisions, defining information about the associated student was also included. Assuming that the school choice selections were made based on

perceived needs or known characteristics of their children, that data was regarded as elaboration about the sample, choosing parents, or as Yin (1993), described it, embedded units. The demographic information describing the sample population was assembled in a study data base.

Freedom of Choice documents provided initial data about the criteria used to select the Renaissance School by the sampled, parent population; why did they choose the Renaissance School? Additional information, regarding their selection criteria and some collateral demographic data, was gathered from surveys mailed to and then completed by the same sampled, parent population. All that collected information was similarly included in the study's data base. Statistical analysis summarized all the demographic data about the sample population and their criteria for selecting the Renaissance School. A picture of the sample population emerged which was analyzed and evaluated within the context of known facts about the entire Renaissance School and its population and other choosing populations. SPSS crosstabulations then matched demographic data, first to itself and then with selection criteria data checking for variations and possible patterns or relationships. The data from the sample population's crosstabulations was analyzed and also evaluated within the context of the Renaissance School circumstances. Additionally, the outcomes of research looking at other choosing populations, summarized from the literature, provided prospects and a measure for comparison and contrast as the data from the crosstabulations about the sample population were analyzed.

Finally, using data obtained from focus groups conducted with specifically selected, yet volunteering parents from the sample population, this examination attempted to expand, to better understand, to refine and to clarify the information collected from the documents and the surveys regarding selection criteria used by that parent population. Utilization of the focus group data could corroborate or contradict the qualitative findings already assembled from the study associated with the sample population's selection criteria.

From the breadth of all the data collected, and the lens provided by the sample population, the study concluded by looking at the newest and most "choosing" population of parents in the Montclair Public Schools, the Renaissance community. Who, in fact, was choosing? What criteria directed the expanded levels of discretion afforded this population or did the criteria vary? Were there variations and patterns or relationships evident between the sampled population and their selection criteria? Did the sample Renaissance population display characteristics typically ascribed to researched, choosing populations elsewhere or were there differences? Were the theoretical conjectures highlighted in current literature manifest in this examined sample population?

Specific organizational arrangements for examining the inquiries delineated above were assembled in the following chapters. Chapter One framed the problem and provided a research rationale. Chapter Two reviewed the literature and set forth a theoretical base and models for comparison in this study. Chapter Three outlined the research design and methodology utilized in the study, and Chapter

Four presented the findings. A concluding and summarizing Chapter Five, analyzed and evaluated this study's data within the framework of the theoretical rationale and other researched populations designating implications and recommendations.

The researcher's experience in the pilot study and continuing throughout the present examination, revealed that identifying, analyzing and evaluating the selection criteria used by parents is a complicated task. School choice selections were formed within a larger context. They were intertwined and not always distinguishable from those adjoining circumstances. The context may have indeed affected formation and execution of the selection criteria, perhaps establishing some type of causal relationship. Yin (1993), indicated that recognition of that duality is not peculiar to educational research.

The need to look at those recognized, contextual conditions while exploring the phenomenon compelled, however, the selected methodology, case study, and further directed research design (Yin, 1993). Additionally, the expectation that the study would conclude with some assessment and comparison of findings necessitated other considerations in research design (Yin, 1993). Chapter Three will address more exhaustively both the research design and research methodology directed toward these stipulations.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

A fundamental assumption in this study was that parents and communities alike seek the best possible education for children and go through some process to

achieve that aim. If school choice is part of that process, we can presume it is formulated through policy and then is subscribed to by constituencies with some hope or sense of fulfilling a perceived need, belief or value. Problems arise because formulating and implementing any school choice policy takes place within the political community, not in isolation (Stone, 1997). Conflicting values, goals, ideologies and obligations collide. How do we resolve those conflicts? What we are willing to concede or accommodate, delineates the current setting or public policy. If concessions or adaptations change, so will the outcomes. New policies and perhaps even new goals can result. Public policy and its formation, while not fully investigated as a process here, added contextual conditions to this study of school choice beyond the aforementioned background and setting.

In his budget message of 1999, the current superintendent of the Montclair Public Schools, Michael Osnato, outlined his perceived goals for the district. These goals prioritized and established current public policy for education in Montclair. Particularly evident in that inventory were fiscal stability, continued school choice options and integrated schools. Those preferences underscored, presumably, the contemporary values of the Montclair community, and they were consonant with the issues pertinent to this study about school choice. They conveyed tenets of policy formation or the rational attempts to attain objectives.

At the end of this study, a final chapter will analyze and evaluate the findings, designating implications and recommendations. While the impact of policy formation and the tenants of its fabrication are acknowledged, the focus for

that concluding chapter is not a policy assessment. That was not the intent of this research. This study, framed by time and activity (Creswell, 1994), endeavored to identify and analyze the school choice criteria used by an identified and then described parent population at a specific setting. What was eventually encountered, therefore, reflected a somewhat larger context of competing beliefs and values playing out only momentarily to a certainly, somewhat greater, yet only acknowledged accompaniment.

Furthermore, looking at the criteria used by parents exercising their school choice options constitutes only a portion of the school choice process. While significant and crucial, as mentioned earlier, it is not the whole picture. Comprehensive knowledge and understanding about school choice depends on additional research pertaining to other aspects of school choice. This study, while reflective, focused on data from only three years at one location. It investigated school choice only within a named middle school setting of Montclair, a suburban/urban community. It looked at choice operating only within a controlled choice paired with magnet structure school district. The diversity and structure of school choice elsewhere remains enormous. This study scrutinized only a volunteer sample of a larger population. To what extent did the sample population typify the larger population of the Renaissance School or the larger population of school choice parents else where?

Additionally, the study did not intend to compare or contrast the Renaissance School with the other two middle schools in Montclair. Only similar

studies of those schools would initiate the capacity for that analysis. The intent of this study was an in-depth portrayal of the unique circumstances of the Renaissance School.

Sources of error in this research, or inutilities to the design and methods selected included (a) possible bias since the researcher is an employee of the district in the aforementioned Renaissance School, and (b) the study itself as a descriptive survey; a case study with particular design strategies (Leddy, 1997). Case study methodology, because it embodies qualitative data, is often criticized for lacking the rigor of quantitative research, since technically the study never truly samples the population (Yin, 1993). Case study viewed proportionately, however, combines the best of both methodologies, gathering quantitative data that then can be substantiated or refuted by collateral qualitative findings. Previous research on both effective schools and magnet schools implementations emphasized the importance of qualitative data for addressing major issues and identifying strengths and weaknesses of those programs (Metz, 1986). Case study, in utilizing two types of data, reveals particular strengths in its ability to deal with both varieties of evidence (Yin, 1993).

As for researcher bias, part of the researcher's job description as sixth grade science teacher and team leader at the Renaissance School since it opened in 1997, necessitates that she participates in the open houses and informational programs given early each calendar year as parents consider their Freedom of Choice options. Additionally, the researcher, in her assigned positions, has had or

currently has, intense professional relations with all of the population selected for study. That relationship spans the entire three years of the Renaissance School's existence. Furthermore, the researcher was part of the planning and design team of the Renaissance School at its inception. Although this involvement is quite significant and some basic assumptions emerge regarding that association, no theory is postulated here that would suggest the researcher had a pre-determined outcome to the inquiry. Instead, similar research and other evaluations of school choice highlighted in the literature chapter provided the expectations of possible outcomes. The literature also provided the basis for rival theory formation against which to judge the same data detected from this study.

While the researcher, as a contributing originator and ongoing collaborator at the Renaissance School, and eight year veteran of the district, assumed a position of possible suspicion with regard to any objective study of that school, the same reality conversely imparted meaningful completeness to the study. The opportunity to investigate school choice in such a familiar context was much akin to the posture established by researchers conducting ethnographic studies. Being part of the situation observed allowed the researcher to move along a continuum between "complete observer" and "complete participant" (Leddy, 1997), and while this study was not ethnographic research, circumstances furnished some of those same possibilities. Case study, the selected methodology for this investigation, also assumes that the researcher undertakes an interactive role. It is not unusual

for the researcher conducting a case study to be personally involved with the people and the phenomenon being studied.

Moreover, note that the researcher did not command any benefit or advantage of employment or financial remuneration from the Montclair Public Schools based on the outcomes of this study. Additionally, the participation of any subject in this research was voluntary; they could decline or withdraw at any time and all participants' identities, and any data obtained, remained anonymous. Participation, or declining to be involved in this study, had no connection to the researcher's contractual responsibilities to the study population as an employee of the Montclair Board of Education.

Possible bias, therefore, because of the researcher or the specified descriptive case study methodology or research design was acknowledged but was counterbalanced with design strategies, including rival theory testing and multiple sources of evidence as further described in Chapter Three.

The intent of the study was solely to identify and analyze formulated criteria used by a selected, and described, population of parents exercising school choice options in a specific setting. Related and relevant research summarized in Chapter Two along with the design and methodology outlined in Chapter Three provided the eventual framework with which to collect, view, analyze, interpret and evaluate this study's data.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify and analyze the criteria employed by an identified suburban/urban population as they exercised extended options afforded through school choice toward admission of their children to a public middle school. The selected population came from families who chose the Renaissance School in Montclair, New Jersey over the course of three years since its formation. After assembling both qualitative and quantitative data, the examination identified individual descriptive characteristics for those selected parents while distinguishing the parameters used by the parents in their school choice decisions.

Along with investigating formulated selection criteria, and the individuals utilizing it, the study looked for variations and possible patterns or relationships between criteria and the choosing parent assemblages. Finally, the study analyzed and evaluated data collected. Did the Renaissance School population display characteristics typically ascribed to researched, choosing populations elsewhere or are there differences? Were the theoretical conjectures highlighted in current literature made evident by this examined population or did other conclusions result?

Research Questions

Research questions for this study were formulated to examine a parent population, applying through Freedom of Choice to the Renaissance School in Montclair, New Jersey. In an attempt to (a) identify and define that population,

(b) identify and analyze their school choice selection criteria, (c) detect variations and possible patterns or relationships between the selection criteria and the choosing population, and (d) evaluate data about this school choice intervention and implementation against other researched populations and the conjectures of theory, the following research questions assembled:

1. Who chooses the Renaissance Middle School?

2. What criteria were used to make that selection?

3. Are there detectable relationships between those selecting the Renaissance School and the criteria they use?

4. Does the Renaissance School population display characteristics typically ascribed to researched, choosing populations elsewhere or are there differences?

5. Are the theoretical conjectures highlighted throughout current literature made evident by this examined population or do other conclusions result?

Chapter Summary

Extending the policies of school choice affords parents new opportunities and additional challenges in the educational process. The policies build on the supposition that school choice will serve as a catalyst for change to reform and improve schools. In offering school choice as a reform instrument, much of what policymakers have forecasted about enhanced, educational excellence is contingent on the competition that school choice promotes. If parents value high achievement, effectiveness or innovation and exercise choice options toward

achieving those ends, elements of market place discipline will bring about the desired reform.

However, there is persistent concern as to whether the chance to choose schools extends to all. The dialogue continues as to whether school choice, even if impartially accessible, will bring about the desired reforms. Critics argue that parents choose schools for many reasons that are unrelated to the effectiveness of schools. School choice will weaken the social cohesion of communities and increase racial and class polarization.

School choice initiatives, however continue to advance. How, then do parents make their choices? Who is choosing? What criteria are they using or are there differing parameters depending on the choosing parents? Is the Renaissance School population typical of researched, choosing populations elsewhere or are there differences? Are speculations revealed by the theoretical base about school choice elsewhere made evident in this examined population or do other conclusions result? The examination of a sample, choosing, parent population associated with the Renaissance School over the last three years, the criteria they used, and an analysis and evaluation of that intervention and implementation may provide some added understanding about that aspect of school choice.

Definition of Terms

504 Designation -- Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, re-authorized in 1991 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), prohibits discrimination against handicapped persons. This civil rights legislation

protects all individuals who have one or more physical or mental impairments that might substantially limit a major life activity. Within the context of the educational setting, the mandate of 504 is to ensure that a quality educational experience is provided for children whose disabilities do not fall within the narrower definition of special education disabilities. A 504 designation results in articulated adaptations or accommodations to the educational program of an individual student which then ensures the full equity of educational opportunity. Recently, 504 designations appear to be more frequently requested by parents; parents who feel that their children need modifications to the educational program presented, but may also want to avoid a special education classification for that child.

Consumer preference, selection -- Consumer preference or selection was used to describe parents' school choice activity. The term evolves from an economic paradigm that looks at the educational process in a quasi-market model comprising a producer/provider and a customer/consumer.

Controlled choice -- Controlled choice allows selection only to the point where the racial composition within a particular school reflects the district as a whole. This regulatory contrivance, sometimes also called limited choice, often is made manifest by the establishment of racial ceilings or a selective admission policy that maintains a pre-determined racial distribution. The modification creates calculable slots designated by race, and often gender, somewhat akin to quotas, but euphemistically called goals. Some students obtain their choice; others are denied that option. In matters of public policy formation, controlled choice can promote

equity. At the present time, the Montclair Public Schools are on notice from the Office of Civil Rights that race alone can no longer be used exclusively in the student selection process, without first carefully documenting the use of race neutral factors in that proceeding (Memo, March 9, 1999).

Desegregation -- Desegregation is school integration or bringing students of different ethnic and racial groups into the same school setting. Its goal is to ensure equal educational opportunity and access for all, thus eliminating segregation. Desegregation is a policy consideration regarding equity.

District Factor Group -- The District Factor Group (DFG) is an indicator of the socioeconomic status of citizens composing each school district in New Jersey. The DFG designations, first developed in 1974, were updated most recently in 1992 using seven demographic variables from the 1990 United States Census. The variables are combined using a statistical technique called principal components analysis and then result in a single measure of socioeconomic status. Districts are ranked according to their scores on this measure and then divided into eight groups based on the score interval in which their scores are located. Eight DFGs have been created ranging from A (lowest socioeconomic districts) to J (highest socioeconomic districts. Montclair is in District Factor Group "GH". Seventy-eight other districts in the state are also in the GH group. District Factor Groups have been used for the comparative reporting of test results from New Jersey's statewide testing programs and in part to determine relative resource distributions to individual school districts.

Educational environment -- Educational environment is a designation used in the evaluation of the study's data to summarize selection criteria associated with the overall circumstances of the selected school. School location, school atmosphere, school size and reputation of the staff are specific selection criteria that typified the selection criteria associated with educational environment.

Educational quality -- Educational quality is a designation used in the evaluation of the study's data to summarize selection criteria associated with the overall academic caliber of the selected school. Rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum and instructional approach are specific selection criteria that typified the selection criteria associated with educational quality.

Equity -- Equity is used in this study to mean equality; educational equality. In matters of policy formation, equity judges the fairness, justness or evenhandedness of a policy. Does school choice or its resulting strategies promote educational equity; is the entire population treated equally and offered the same opportunities as a result of the extended school choice policy?

Feeder school -- Feeder school implies a route or plan by which students are brought into a school's enrollment from another usually lower grade school. In the case of Montclair, feeder schools are chiefly determined by pedagogical similarity and to some extent by geographic location; some elementary magnet schools naturally feed into certain middle magnet schools, some early grade primary magnet schools into intermediate magnet sites. Students who attend the

elementary science and technology magnet are likely to continue in the middle school science and technology magnet.

Freedom of Choice -- Freedom of Choice is the official language used by the Montclair Public Schools to describe its school choice process. The Freedom of Choice document is an authorized form that must be filed with the district by a specific date to request admission to a school other than the natural magnet, feeder school. Since there is only one high school in the district, Freedom of Choice documents are not necessary for high school admission. The Freedom of Choice document asks for some general information about the student; that is, race, name and current school. Parents must designate a first and second choice preference and indicate the rationale for that choice as they complete the Freedom of Choice form.

Magnets -- Magnets are one scheme for establishing school choice. Conceptually magnets solicit a broad and diverse spectrum of the community, individually offering specialized programs based on themes or pedagogy in addition to a core curriculum. Students and their families choose magnets which reflect their own individual preferences connected to organization, technique, interest or learning style. Magnets employ a notion about best fit, responding to an individual's needs or wishes. Offerings from magnets target specific interest groups creating distinctly separate yet purportedly equal institutions. Theoretically, magnets ensure equity while allowing vast amounts of personal liberty (Morton, 1991).

Migration -- Migration was first used in the ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) data base in 1966 to describe white flight to private or suburban schools as a consequence of forced desegregation. Now the term migration has been broadened in ERIC to include any wholesale movements from public to private schools, regardless of race or reason.

Neighborhood schools -- Neighborhood schools denote a tradition of going to school within walking distance or geographic area surrounding students' homes. Neighborhood schools usually do not require busing because they are designated by residential zones.

Pilot -- Pilot, for this study, refers to a small case study conducted in the fall of 1998 as part of the requirements for a research course at Seton Hall University. At the time of that investigation, only fifteen Afro-American females were in the sixth grade class of seventy-nine at the Renaissance School. Nine of those students had selected the Renaissance School; the other six were assigned. Those nine students, representing only 11 % of the class, seemed a distinct population to study. The data obtained from that pilot study, while separate, along with issues in currently published research, gave rise to the present study.

Policy formation -- Policy formation is the specific plan, method or procedure devised to bring about identified goals that are reflective of widely held values or beliefs. Policies are arrived at through a process of concessions, trade-offs and adaptations toward resolving often competing goals from within the political

community. Deborah Stone (1997), called them collective intention. School

choice is an example of public policy assembled through this process.

Reliability -- Reliability is the term applied to the analysis and evaluation of data

from this study. Reliability is a reflection of the consistency of the data. In other

words, is what is detected really there or is it an idiosyncratic occurrence?

Reliability within a case study can be enhanced through formal protocols and the

creation of a comprehensive data base (Yin, 1984, 1989).

School choice -- School choice is the selection of a public or private school, or an

alternative program of schooling made possible through tax credits, vouchers,

magnet programs or open enrollments without reference to place of residency.

School choice offers parents an opportunity to select educational options for their

child without reference to place of residency. In matters of public policy

formation, school choice extends individual liberty. Contrived vocabulary like

"choosing population" and "choosers" was used throughout the study to describe

the selected populations opting for this process. Best estimates are that about 90

% of the parents in Montclair receive their first choice of schools through Freedom

of Choice.

Segregation -- Segregation is the term applied to <u>de jure</u> or <u>de facto</u> segregation.

It involves practice, policy or law that excludes students on the basis of race,

ethnicity or gender from particular schools. Segregation is the opposite of school

integration.

Social cohesion -- Social cohesion is a concept elevated by the goals of the common and comprehensive schools to ensure education for social understanding and democratic participation through similar, prescribed curriculum. Polarization and Balkanization (Bhagavan, 1996) are the rationale used by critics of school choice who argue that social cohesion dissolves in education as a result of school choice. School choice, it is alleged, may eventually break up communities or schools into smaller, often competing units resulting in divisiveness and a lack of social cohesiveness (Hiebowitsh, 1995).

Special Education -- Special education is a program in most schools that offers additional support or instructional services to students who have an identified educational disability. Children evaluated and then classified as special education students have a formal, written, educational plan called an IEP (Individualized Education Program) which describes how that student currently performs in school and then details specific instructional adaptations or interventions to compensate for the educational disability and assist the child in the successful participation in their educational program.

SPSS -- SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) is one of three widely used statistical software programs used to manipulate and analyze research data. It can be utilized to inspect both descriptive and inferential data. Crosstabulations inspect matched variables effect reported as percentages frequencies.

STARS -- STARS (Services To Academically At Risk Students) is the specific name given to Montclair's implementation of Chapter 1 of the Education

Consolidation and Improvement Act (ECIA) of 1981. Originally called Title I, the program is designed to provide at risk students with individual instructional support in reading, language arts and mathematics. Students are identified for STARS through teacher recommendations/ratings, scores from the Metropolitan or state ESPA tests and report card grades.

Stanine -- The stanine is a standard score used in reporting standardized test scores; the mean is five and the standard deviation is two. Stanines of 1, 2 or 3 are below average. Stanines of 4, 5 or 6 are average and stanines of 7, 8 or 9 are above average. Stanine scores are helpful in interpreting standardized test score profiles. Stanines were used in this study to report MAT scores (Metropolitan Achievement Tests).

Validity -- Internal validity for this study gauged whether the research instruments or designs measured what they claimed to evaluate. Internal validity was enhanced through identified units of analysis, by developing prior rival theories and collection and analysis of data to test those rivals.

External validity ascertained whether appropriate inferences or generalizations were drawn from the analysis of the data collected from this study. External validity was enhanced through developing specific theoretical relationships from which those generalizations could be drawn.

Construct validity is the use of instruments and measures that "accurately operationalize the constructs of interest in a study." Because most measures and instruments are not as accurate as desired, strategies seeking multiple sources of

evidence are formed in case study design to support construct validity (Yin, 1984, 1989).

CHAPTER II

Review of Related and Relevant Literature

The purpose of this study was to identify and analyze the criteria employed by an identified suburban/urban parent population as they exercised extended options afforded through school choice toward admission of their children to a public middle school. The selected population came from families who chose the Renaissance School in Montclair, New Jersey over the course of three years since its formation. While the entirety of the study's research design and methodology are itemized in Chapter Three, it is critical that mention of those strategies occur here as a prologue to Chapter Two. The following remarks will summarize the intent of, focus for and crucial link arising between this study and the literature.

Both the research design and methodology for this study had a direct connection to a vast pool of prior investigations in the literature (Yin, 1993). From that related, published research, a theory developed which sequentially directed how this study advanced, the steps, and its ultimate conceptual style, the form (Yin, 1993). From the literature review, a rationale emerged to form the theoretical basis or framework for the study expressed through research design and selected methodology. The literature also provided the comparative models against which the data discovered in this study was analyzed and evaluated. Ultimately, the literature review directed the strategic combination of data that buttressed the study's completeness. By framing and integrating the collection,

analysis, evaluation and interpretations of the study's findings, theory mirrored for this social science research, the process used in most experimental investigation (Yin, 1993).

Objective, with emphasis and connection clearly specified, Chapter Two first designated a conceptual background with which to view school choice. Related and relevant literature speculated about the numerous factors influencing the contemporary expansion of school choice programs. Furthermore, the literature provided the rationalizations for school choice as an effectual organizational paradigm by acknowledging those contextual circumstances and then directing the desired educational reform. Review of this literature supplied a context for examining the Renaissance School phenomenon from the perspective of origin and impact (Yin, 1993).

The second section of the review concentrated on literature directly connected to this study's purpose. Substantial inquiry disclosed the investigations of selecting parent populations in other researched settings. That literature in particular, established expectations toward the selection, collection, analysis and evaluation of the Renaissance School data (Chen, 1990). It also expedited the formation of rival theories for examining the same detected data (Yin, 1993). Who was choosing the Renaissance School, their parameters of choice and any emerging patterns all were gathered and compared with reference to the comprehensive research of school choice elsewhere. That analysis and evaluation, because of the chosen methodology for the current study, case study, established

an essential and compelling theoretical base. The literature eventually advanced understandings and sanctioned generalizations not to a universal population, but instead to situations similar to the Renaissance School where context was important and variables uncontrolled (Yin, 1993).

Finally, collateral examinations in the literature, specifically pertaining to Montclair were reviewed. Results from those investigations were juxtaposed with the findings of the current study and the theoretical base, then amplified in data analysis and evaluation, comparing and contrasting what others discovered about Montclair prior to the current study. Not all of those studies projected the same purpose identified in this research, and they were confined to other time intervals. Their inclusion, however, broadened this study and facilitated, somewhat, pattern matching or triangulation for this study (Leddy, 1997).

<u>Interpretations About Why School Choice Re-Emerged</u>

Shifting attitudes and circumstances in the nation overall, paralleled by a series of educationally connected events, have altered the direction of public schooling over the last three decades. One eventuality of that transition was the resurgence of school choice as a popular, albeit controversial, policy for improving and reforming American schools, while at the same time equalizing educational opportunities. Current literature chronicled differing explanations for the recent revival of school choice designating a conceptual background. The varying interpretations of that resurgence can promote our understanding of the choice process related to parent selection in situations where school choice is extended

Until recently, lingering vestiges of the nineteenth century school ideal of creating a common culture through common and comprehensive schools essentially formed the rationale supporting not only about our actions, but the foundation of our beliefs about schools (Spring, 1997). It slanted our ideas about curriculum, how that instruction should occur, and moreover, dictated how we would finance and govern public education.

The Civil Rights' Movement of the 1960s and resulting legislation, particularly laws putting an end to legal segregation, directly challenged the common school ideal (Elmore & Fuller, 1996). Those with a new found racial and cultural pride insisted that multiculturalism and diversity order the priorities for schools. Previously unrecognized groups demanded that their distinct cultures be acknowledged and incorporated into public school agendas and curriculums. The ideal of creating a common culture was seriously under attack and a succession within education irreversibly changed.

Despite the new recognition and acceptance of ethnic variety within American society, for many outside the dominant, mainstream, mostly White and middle class culture, there remained an intense perception about vanishing opportunities for upward mobility. Those sentiments encouraged greater use of ideas like school choice to advance educational and social equity (Hausman, Goldring & Moirs, 1997). School integration strategies, through school choice it was believed, would give low-income or poorly educated families greater accessibility to preferred schools outside their own formerly isolated communities.

Utilizing school choice would therefore form a path for promoting social change and equal opportunity.

At the same time, Protestant fundamentalists, a community who long championed the common school norms, felt increasingly excluded from an educational system which was confronting a new awareness of diversity (Spring, 1997). The Supreme Court, unwilling to breach the wall prescribed by the First Amendment to the Constitution, made decisions in the 1960s that further estranged this population from the religious right (Spring, 1997). Engel v. Vitale (1962), officially ending prayer in the public schools, brought bitter debate, and the religious right claimed the Supreme Court had removed God from the schools. The 1963 Abington School District v. Schempp decision outlawing the reading of Bible verses at the start of each day added to that fury. Fundamentalists felt those Court decisions undermined their own most valued moral and spiritual purposes. If these concerns met sustained disregard, creating a separate religious school system seemed one plausible solution for the conservative agenda (Spring, 1997). Fundamentalists sought recognition and support from an educational system no longer based on the common ideal and definition their traditional values had so long championed. School choice, however, would offer them some consideration.

Even those not strictly aligned with the ongoing cultural wars, mounted an intensive outcry for reform and improvement in the public educational system. The release of findings by the National Commission of Excellence in Education, A Nation At Risk, in 1983, compelled parents and communities alike to re-examine

their own educational systems and the policies that supported them. Tax payers at large, especially those without school age children, sounded alarms and signaled an unwillingness to further support a system they viewed in decline (Spring, 1997). A vast, diverse and frustrated public demanded acknowledgment and appropriate immediate action regarding concerns about the lack of academic excellence, accountability and inequities in accessibility and resources.

Apart from the voiced discontentment and receding support, increased interest in privatization models that emphasized educational excellence over equity heightened (Hausman et al., 1997). According to these researchers, such models seemed particularly attractive because there was dissatisfaction with services provided by the government and an emerging desire to restrict government's role within public institutions. Politically and socially, a more conservative climate spread nationwide, designated by some, "fundamental traditionalism," or a renewed interest in private market values (Murphy, 1996). Murphy believed the same discontent identified by Hausman and associates grew after decades of government expansion and encroachment into individual rights (Murphy, 1996). Waning confidence, a general caution over huge bureaucracies, and anxiety about how amassed resources transferred from one generation to the next, fostered increased interest in school choice alternatives and the options they promised (Murphy, 1996).

Milton Friedman (1962), caught the attention of the educational community and the public at large when he called for the expanded use of

vouchers citing that the quality of education was worst when parents had few options or none. Friedman declared that the goals of fraternity, equity and efficiency in education would best be served through the use of government financed vouchers. He argued that vouchers would separate the nexus between public support of education, place of residence, and public ownership of the educational enterprise (Friedman, 1962). Under Friedman's plan, parents who sent their children to private schools would receive a voucher equal to the estimated cost of educating that child in a public school, provided the money was spent on an approved school. The role of the government would be confined to ensuring that selected schools met minimum standards. If the cost of the private school was larger than the amount allocated, the parents would make up the difference. While the expansion of and debate over vouchers continues today, Friedman's stalwart proposals at that time created yet another step toward emerging school choice policies.

In addition, the public collectively was becoming increasingly knowledgeable and certainly more sophisticated in its own understandings of educational strategies (Wise & Darling-Hammond, 1982). An ever expanding knowledge about learning and cognition emerged throughout society, made evident by increasing numbers of self-help groups and "new age" self awareness. Creditable, yet varied pedagogical, options were no longer just the domain of educational professionals or researchers, and parents demanded alternative selections and a degree of discretion when enrolling their children in schools. If

alternatives or improvements were not forthcoming, many, especially those with individual resources, threatened to leave the public system. School choice would give those with financial resources discretionary options and perhaps stem that threatened migration.

Paul Cookson (1992), regarded the resurgence of school choice from different perspectives. He alleged that the recent interest in school choice was part of a much larger and ongoing debate that perhaps was intensified in more conservative environs. That bigger deliberation, he maintained, called for school improvement after a reflective and profound discussion over values and beliefs. Cookson suggested that school choice highlighted an abiding dilemma in education: what was the optimal balance between an individual family's freedom to choose a school and the rights of the larger collective community to ensure equality? While the current debate focused on educational issues, Cookson saw a deliberation that proceeded in many areas of secular interchange, ultimately revolving around issues of liberty and equity. Increased interest in school choice reflected for Cookson, a values' consideration and signaled, momentarily, a re-definition of individual liberty as we examined efficiency and equity through educational policies (Cookson, 1992).

Others suggested that the school choice question was not at all new to American education, perhaps now only more generalized. Elmore and Fuller (1996), pointed out that Catholic families who chose parochial schools had long sought options to public schooling. Likewise, they cited that immigrant parents

and working class liberals had long opposed upper-middle-class control of school politics. Affluent parents had repeatedly looked for the most eminent, effective prep schools. Their research presumed that school choice also resulted as families made housing choices, day care decisions and used their collective knowledge and social pull to secure certain instructors or programs for their children. In most cases, school choice was fashioned by the wealth, ethnicity, and cultural status of the parents and the communities they inhabited (Elmore & Fuller, 1996; Lewis, 1998). If there was a marked difference in the current interest about school choice, it was that now not only the wealthy, educated or those with specific religious affiliations were anticipating the alternatives school choice offered.

Political and ideological shifts also emerged in the early 1990s as school districts were discharged from court orders to desegregate. Cases like the Board of Education of Oklahoma City Public Schools v. Dowell (1991), and Freeman v. Pitts (1992), ended federal supervision of school districts and changed some of our expectations about education by allowing new levels of local school district autonomy. Formalized political agendas also signified school choice was not only an option, but perhaps somewhat of a priority. In 1990, President Bush called on state governors to meet with him for a summit on education. The group led by then governor, Bill Clinton, outlined actions to improve the nation's educational system. Later their agenda resulted in the Goals 2000 Act. One of the recommendations in Goals 2000 called for a system of school choice wherein

parents could send their children to any school, public or private, that they considered most advantageous (Spring, 1997).

Edward Fiske (1989), summarized the widespread political appeal that school choice initiatives promised. For more conservative populations, school choice would inject a dose of the free market conditions they held necessary preceding any realization of possible reform. For liberal constituencies, school choice granted assurances that the less educated or less affluent would command some of the same freedoms typically afforded only the wealthy. Certainly, school choice enjoyed support from a broad spectrum of political assemblies.

Beyond the various interpretations surrounding contemporary school choice resurgence, notwithstanding the vying constituencies pursuing its promises, a transformation had materialized and the prospect of school choice as a reality re-emerged. That same expectation, however, presented yet another dilemma demanding resolution. How would school choice provide an effectual organizational paradigm for acknowledging the contextual circumstances of school choice and then bring about the desired educational reforms?

<u>Reasoning School Choice as a Reform Strategy</u>

Some of the first efforts at acknowledging the diverse concerns respecting public education, and summoning the demanded reforms, were attempts to correct the huge fiscal discrepancies among schools so starkly portrayed by Jonathan Kozol in his book, <u>Savage Inequalities</u> (1991). Ranked among the highest when compared with other large postindustrial countries, the United States directed

nearly 7.5 % of the nation's gross domestic product toward education in the early

1990s (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1995). Those resources were

not evenly distributed, however. Despite well-intended goals aimed at correcting

those inconsistencies, the ensuing policies generally failed to deliver the desired

reform, and inequities in the distribution of resources among and within schools

remained extensive (Kozol, 1991). Furthermore, the reformation efforts clearly

demonstrated that bringing about equity in the distribution of funding would not

necessarily produce equity in student achievement unless the organization of the

educational system was addressed simultaneously (Elmore, 1990). Even schools

with adequate resources saw their test scores dropping (Elmore, 1990) and that

meant education all told had to look elsewhere, at more than just financial equity

to achieve quality education.

Given existing educational organization and practice, the problem seemed

to be not so much about a lack of resources, but the nature of those resources and

the way they were used. Many argued that the very nature of traditional school

structure and governance ensured poor performance. That sentiment,

compounded by a new era of spending caps, budget restraints and decreasing

governmental support, ushered in additional educational objectives connected to

efficiency. If the desired outputs of education could be improved using available

resources, or could maintain high levels of output with fewer resources, the level

of productivity within education would certainly increase. Efficiency therefore,

had to be a consideration of reform and school choice could address those issues of productivity (Chubb & Moe, 1985, 1990).

Summoning the models of effective schools research, Chubb and Moe (1990), argued that much of what occurred in schools required discrete action. In the vast bureaucracy of school organization, great effort and substantial time was required to secure agreement on issues that were intrinsically subjective. Conversely, under the conditions which school choice would provide, Chubb and Moe saw efforts formerly expended toward that consensus building process, instead redirected toward the actual work of schools: efficient academic accomplishment. Their work accentuated organizational and environmental elements and connected much of the poor achievement realized by American public school children to institutions functioning under direct democratic controls. They insisted that public school instead needed to be constructed around parent-student choice and individual school autonomy that would induce market-like competition (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Addressing efficiency would likewise mean looking at the function of the educational system. Many suggested changing the overall operation and activity of the system, by inducing those same market-like forces, also would promote efficiency (Randall, 1990). Such market models could provide incentives and numerous opportunities for change. In those economic models, the process for reform and decision making was viewed as an accommodation between supplier and consumer. For example, school bureaucracies have long endured criticism for

being unwieldy and unresponsive. By changing operational patterns through innovations like school-based decision making (SBDM), the focus would change (Cuban, 1988). SBDM expanded the authority of practicing, professional educators in designing and governing schools. It provided one strategy to address efficiency from the provider side of the market model.

Permitting extended discretion to parents, as they made decisions about which schools their children would attend, focused on the customer side of the same market model. School choice served as a means of increasing the influence of the consumer of educational services (Goodlad, 1984). Parents would have more of a voice over what went on in schools and that influence would balance existing controls directed by the government, professional administrators and educators (Adler, 1993).

Many envisioned the market model of school choice as an instrument of reform, expecting the policy of extended options to provide new levels of excellence and accessibly within education (Sizer, 1985). The expectations and arguments to that end depended extensively on the behaviors that followed and the balances that existed between provider and consumer in the market model. Providing management through change similar to SBDM allowed for the time and expertise necessary to tailor instruction to the needs and interests of the student clients. It addressed only the supplier side of the model, however. The balance would not result unless the same attention was conferred on the consumer. If parents valued efficiency, specifically customized innovations, and wanted their

children exposed to such, school choice would become a necessity and would balance parental interests against professional expertise (Hill, 1993).

It must be noted, however, that there was neither universal support for the policies of school choice nor agreement about the marketplace models used to substantiate its effectiveness. Tony Wagner (1996), maintained that the entire notion of an educational system operating within a free-market system was flawed. For him, school choice would improve education only if we allowed it to re-invent, not merely reform the system. Kevin Smith and Kenneth Meier (1995), challenged the sociological, philosophical and economic explanations regarding school choice. Their theories disputed what they identified as three invalid hypotheses from which school choice proponents initiated their arguments. For Smith and Meier, school choice popularity sprang from myths that school districts were failing, that there was vast dissatisfaction with schools, and finally, a persistent notion that somehow private schools were better.

Critics of school choice also argued, that in the competing arena of an open market system which school choice presented, schools would have to become unduly concerned with marketing and advertising, thus ignoring real educational issues (Nathan, 1996). Furthermore, assessments would place inappropriate and invalid importance on test scores and statistical declarations in place of true indicators of authentic learning or achievement (Nathan, 1996).

Clabaugh (1998), disputed the notion that unleashing free-market forces would improve urban public schools. He maintained that those arguing the free-

market model made erroneous assumptions about the consequences of competition, particularly within an urban environment. Clabaugh asserted that the best schools would not survive, merely the best adapted; for him best, and best adapted were completely different.

Apart from the notion of a marketplace model, Bastian (1989), questioned the consequences of school choice policies which included attendance options outside a local district. He queried how parents who do not reside in, nor vote in the districts their children attended, would affect matters of policy and budget within the receiving district. His concerns centered on how a representative system of government could proceed when major decisions regarding a district would be determined by constituents of that district speaking only as disassociated representatives from another district.

Bhagavan (1996), also criticized the entire notion of school choice. He claimed it would further Balkanize the country through specialty programs targeted at specific interest groups or populations. For him, those inducements could only delineate and further unravel the loose social fabric of our society and destroy what little pluralism and diversity did exist within communities (Bhagavan, 1996). John O'Neil (1996), agreed that the erosion of common purpose and public support was inevitable if school choice proceeded.

Ironically, the same subtle competition expected from school choice and identified by policy proponents as an enticement toward reform was the aspect of school choice generating considerable controversy from school choice critics.

Garner and Hannaway (1982), contended that schools could not be placed in a pure market model because they had a not-for-profit orientation and the nature of the commodity schools produced was distinct. Additionally, they pointed to the imperfect nature of the resulting competition and the imperfect information available through a school model. Competition under those conditions, made education a scapegoat, punished failure, and resulted in increased disparities between rich and poor. Others charged that while greater school choice could lead to greater satisfaction, that contentment would not necessarily translate into educational values or correct the inequalities built into the educational system (Fisher, 1982).

A variety of factors and competing interests created a renewed interest in school choice. Proponents argued that school choice, viewed within a free-market model, would result in the needed reforms. Others renounced school choice, either as a policy or the rationale about how school choice would bring about the needed educational reforms. Whether one accepts the idea of school choice or the rationale behind a market model, there was persistent documentation that the organizational, structural and governance issues school choice attempted to ameliorate could eventually lead to superior schools. Regardless of the path school choice took, attributes of a school choice policy unquestionably could direct eventual improvement.

School choice, addressing organizational, structural and governance issues, emulated some of the most effective and desired private school conditions in the

public sector (Chubb & Moe, 1985, 1989, 1990). In the quest to improve the educational product, specific strategies employed by schools of choice in both public and private sectors were associated with higher levels of achievement and effectiveness (Bryk, Lee & Smith, 1990; Chubb 1990; Cohen, 1990). Among the strategies that surfaced were creation of small caring communities with focused values, coherent curriculum objectives, high academic standards, and the lack of tracking. Perhaps the most compelling indications about the effectiveness of school choice arose from delving into the issue termed "social capital," an amplification on the conception of a caring community, and looking at the relationships existing between school size and quality.

Various researchers used the term social capital to correlate the favorable aspects associated with school choice. Coleman (1990), affirmed parent choice went toward building that social capital. The partnership that resulted when parents exercised school choice created diverse social relationships that fostered a child's growth and development (Coleman, 1990). A community ethic of mutual caring shaped the identity of the school (Wilson and Rossman, 1986). For Coleman, the fabrication of social capital multiplied the efforts of education and integrated school into the larger social community; it forged commitment and loyalty (Coleman, 1990). The resulting stability resided then, not only with parents, but in a functional community (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). They submitted that the stability resulting from school choice built a valued community,

a highly regarded quality of bygone eras and rural settings, not commonly found in metropolitan areas (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987).

Brown (1995), also identified social capital when he noted the presence of "rich schools in poor neighborhoods" (p. 52). Bryk and associates (1990), likewise registered the reality of social capital as they depicted the attributes of voluntarism and shared values associated with the success of Catholic schools. The relationships formed as a result of that choice, provided norms and sanctions which in turn depended on the social relationships and the completeness of the network provided by those relationships.

Inger Morton (1991), researching magnet schools, also alluded to the notion of social capital. One of the aspects favoring magnets she uncovered was their program coherence. Magnets offered safe, orderly climates. Morton maintained they produced a sense of shared enterprise through the committed faculty, parent population and student body they created. Overall she argued, magnets as an implementation of school choice, enhanced community autonomy or social capital.

Schneider, Teske, Marschall & Roch (1997), articulated the same notion of community autonomy. From their research of four districts, two in New York City and two in New Jersey, they discovered that the districts affording expanded school choice as part of a desegregation plan, promoted increased community involvement and engagement, an attribute they also labeled social capital. In their examined New Jersey populations they contrasted, coincidentally, Montclair, the

district affording extended school choice, with Morristown, which created only residential zones. Within Montclair, social capital or the building of community, was manifest in the statistical analysis. Montclair showed 13 % more participation in PTA and 6 % more sentiment of trust in the district and volunteerism than did Morristown.

Looking at the relationships between school size and quality, Barker and Gump (1964), concluded that large school size had an undesirable influence on the development of certain personal attributes for students. Specifically, they found that in most large schools, just a few students dominated leadership. In smaller schools, proportionally more students took an active part in school programs.

New York City also found the value of small schools combined with school choice and community involvement in the Central Park East Project in East Harlem. In that neighborhood, one of the poorest in the city, over thirty small schools of choice were created. Rather than trying to fit all students into a standard school, a variety of small schools were designed to better meet differing needs of students (Meier, 1995). Goodlad (1984), voiced the same idea when he wrote his comprehensive study, A Place Called School. The superior schools clustering at the top of his study were small when compared to those clustering at the bottom. While he did not see it as an impossible task to have a good large school, he certainly viewed it as more difficult to achieve.

Other current research clearly suggested that small schools have the edge over large schools. Berlin and Cienkus (1989), concluded smaller was better.

They argued that students seemed to learn, change and grow in situations where they felt they had some control, influence and efficacy. They cited situations where parents, students and teachers were bound together in the pursuit of learning as those likely to be the most productive; small schools provided those necessary circumstances. Boyer, in 1983, noted that research over the past decade suggested that smaller schools provided greater opportunity for student participation and greater emotional support than larger schools. Acknowledging that larger schools were difficult to reorganize, he suggested the concept of forming smaller units within the larger frame, "schools-within-a-school." Michelle Fine (1993) noted that large schools were characterized through their passivity rather than through their participation with students. Her study of Philadelphia schools found that large schools promoted a general rather than particularistic perspective for students. Large school size correlated with controlling the students rather than engaging them critically (Fine, 1993).

Elmore and Fuller (1996), contributed closing recommendations about school choice in their book, Who Chooses? Who Loses? They summarized four compelling realities that policymakers needed to address as they judged the worth of any school choice implementation. Those observations conclude this conceptual background.

School choice, even when specifically designed to redress inequalities could intensify separations. While parents sought the best opportunities for their children, the market place produced consumers with differing abilities to choose.

More persistent choosers could impede those less capable or less persistent. School choice policymakers needed to heed that actuality (Elmore & Fuller, 1996).

School choice alone did not create more diversity or improve attainment unless it was linked specifically with the goals of educational enhancement. Educators needed to concentrate on the supply side of the educational market model. Additionally, achievement still seemed to connect most closely with parents' educational or income levels (Elmore & Fuller, 1996).

Minor details could decide the eventual success or failure of any school choice plan. In most situations researched, school choice was optional; according to Elmore and Fuller it should be universal forcing all parents to choose. Additionally, we can not assume that the mainstream, sanctioned or most popular school choices were always the best choices for all students (Elmore & Fuller, 1996). Programs that built about consonant educational instruction or themes revealed the most positive effects (Henig, 1995).

School choice in order to work needed to acknowledge cultural and social aspects in its design and implementation. Some rejected the marketplace analogy when used to describe school choice but even those who conceded the comparison understood that consumers had differing motivations with regard to school choice. Cultural and social values could conceivably take precedence over what might be considered the best educational opportunity (Elmore & Fuller, 1996).

Ultimately, the dialogue about why school choice reappeared, then proceeded, or how it constituted reform was substantial. Continued, consistent

debate over multiple alternatives and fair evaluation of specific implementations in the end will determine outcomes and enlighten the pathway of subsequent policy. Debate assuredly will continue over questions about how we satisfy a societal interest in educational equity while permitting choice in those areas that confer private benefit and are of particular interest to certain families. For now, the research available formed the contextual background and supporting rationale for those propounding or electing to exercise school choice as well as a defense for those who reject the alternative.

Who Chooses? Why? Why Not?

Current data from one examination of school choice suggested that academic excellence, religious and moral environments, and sometimes convenience, were the reasons most mentioned by parent as they exercised school choice options (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1995). For some, however, the appeal of school choice instead arose from differing ideas about preferred structure, organization or pedagogy. Still other research showed that if given the alternative, parents preferred to send their children to neighborhood schools (Elam, Rose & Gallup, 1996). School choice implementations nonetheless are increasing and there were volumes of research regarding the participants of school choice. From that extensive research, emerged one persuasive, re-occurring theme. Irrespective of whether the study emanated from supporters of school choice announcing the achievement of racial balance, or the opponents of school choice deploring the exclusion of non-English speaking parents, the

message was identical. If school districts expected parents to make informed decisions about school choice, all parents needed to have adequate, reliable and timely information about the school choices available.

Witte (1991), studied the school choice process in Minnesota. He asked how parents learned about school choice programs. Most responding indicated that friends and families were primary sources of information and that they also received details about school choice through television, radio, newspapers and their churches. Many shared that making a school choice was still a difficult decision. Witte found however, that almost one-half of the parents he questioned did not have any information about school choice options. He concluded that the Minnesota program suffered from a general lack of public awareness and that information to non-English speaking parents who had limited contact with the schools because of work schedules or feelings of distrust and separateness was negligible. After his study was published, the state commissioner of education in Minnesota initiated numerous outreach programs targeting the identified under-served population. Minority advocacy groups and other state agencies also assisted in a new, stepped-up outreach program supporting school choice.

Witte's research demonstrated the importance of the information systems which must be organized to support school choice implementations. Except for that over-riding contention, the need for adequate information, the research examining who was choosing and the criteria used to inform those actions exposed

widespread conclusions. Furthermore, for those choosing, selecting from the options which school choice extended, the motivations were innumerable.

Some of the earliest empirical data about who was choosing revealed that more often than not, non-instructional factors influenced the choice selection. Location was the most important factor in three studies (Bridge & Blackman, 1978; Kamin & Erickson, 1981; Williams, Hancher & Hunter, 1983). Nault and Uchitelle's study (1982), identified that the atmosphere of the school was the over-riding factor of choice. Parents in that study defined atmosphere primarily through the managerial style of the principal or their child's potential teacher. Achievement levels rated low as factors influencing the parents' decisions. Darling-Hammond and Kirby (1985), found, however, that the perceived school quality affected most school choice decisions.

Two studies done for the National Institute of Education (Coons, 1983; Rossell, 1985), each surveyed parents to uncover selection criteria connected to school choice decisions. The first study, in 1983, surveyed 1200 parents and found that residence, the school to which the child was assigned, transportation, convenience and academic considerations, in that order, affected school choice selections. The later survey done in 1985, identified the quality of the school, location and available transportation as crucial factors.

Mary Metz (1986), discovered that parents applied little effort in matching available schools to their own child's academic needs. Instead, what parents were looking for was a school with a student population of a distinguished social class

and a school building of close proximity to the home. Only a few of the parents in her study chose the schools promoting innovative approaches or alternative pedagogues. Instead, the schools with the least distinctive programs had the longest waiting list of applicants. The middle and working class population highlighted in her study, sought schools of the highest social class possible with also the best achievement levels.

More recent studies discovered differing circumstances and some attempts at matching prospective schools with student needs. Amy Wells (1996), conducted a qualitative study of inner city black youths in St. Louis. She researched the cultural and institutional factors that shaped students' responses to school choice. Her conclusions about why they chose specific schools did not bode well for equity. She interviewed three groups of Afro-American high school students and their parents. They were designated separately in her study as non-choosers, transferees and returnees. The district had extended the invitation to these groups to participate in a city-to-county transfer plan. Returning students from that experience reported that they came back to inner city schools because of academic, disciplinary or adjustment problems. Wells concluded that feelings of familiarity, ethnic solidarity and school proximity were more important than objective school measures, parental aspirations or an achievement mentality. Her conclusions were that this type of school choice alternative could create both winners and losers. Losers were typically students who lacked safety nets or personal advocates that could support them in the school choice process.

A study done by Lee and others (1996), reached additional conclusions regarding school choice. Looking at parental school choice patterns in Detroit, the researchers concluded that although support for school choice was very strong among the low-income and minority families who participated, nearly one-third of the parents surveyed had no opinion about school choice and represented a segment of the population with considerably less income and education than those who exercised their school choice options. Researchers' conclusions reflected the reality that not all families exercised school choice and that the departure of the relatively more advantaged children from their home schools and districts could have an adverse affect on schools and students left behind.

Another study examining Detroit schools (Strate & Wilson, 1991), found that city dwellers of color were more likely to exercise school choice options than were their White suburban counterparts. Those actions were based primarily on beliefs that their own schools in the city were substandard to the ones offered in the suburbs through school choice.

Identical conclusions found support in two parent surveys done in Fort Collins, Colorado (Bomotti, 1996), and Cambridge, Massachusetts (Petronio, 1996). The parents in Ft. Collins who enrolled their children in alternative schools had notable characteristics. Actively involved in their children's education, many reflected the attributes of knowledgeable consumers. Those who did not choose cited transportation problems and program publicity problems as obstacles. The limited segment of parents in Ft. Collins who did exercise their school choice

options were characterized as highly motivated and sophisticated, with the time and resources to work the system. Bomotti argued that if only the attention of that select assemblage was captured through school choice offerings, tremendous aspects of inequities would occur and "creaming" would become a distinct possibility.

Patterns uncovered from the parents in Cambridge challenged the notion that parents indeed want school choice and will use Parent Informational Centers to gather information about particular school's performance (Petronio, 1996). Both the Ft. Collins study and the Cambridge study raised particular questions concerning equity and quality within school choice programs. Petronio's study also identified two general groups of choosing parents in terms of values and underlying themes. One group, composed of more middle and upper class parents, preferred nontraditional educational programs, while the other group, consisting of lower income parents, generally supported more traditional plans. These findings challenged some common assumptions about the ways in which families make school choice decisions.

Abigail Thernstrom (1991), also explored equity and quality issues in Massachusetts schools. Her study found that the controlled choice plans adopted by many districts to ensure racial balance instead severely limited parental choice and imperiled the entire notion of equity within the school choice process. Under controlled school choice plans, she discovered that those who could afford to exercise true school choice fled the system if their original school choice

preferences were denied. The aftermath of that flight weakened the choice schools and exacerbated the racial and social segregation dictated by residential plans.

Donna Oliver and Ameetha Palanki wrote a journal article in 1992, recounting the experience of one Afro-American mother in the controlled choice setting offered in Fall River, Massachusetts. While designed to bring about racial balance, the school choice offered her family proved quite unsatisfactory. The mother decided to take her children out of the suburban schools they originally had selected and return to the city school within their own neighborhood. Accounts of blatant racial bias prompted her decision to return to the city schools.

In the Langunitas Schools in California, a school choice option had operated for twenty-four years (Lambert & Lambert, 1989). Parents could choose the following options: academic and enrichment programs in kindergarten through Grade 5, Montessori in kindergarten through Grade 6, open classroom in kindergarten through Grade 6, middle school for Grades 6 through 8 or transfer to another district. That region claimed high success with its students, partially because as researchers found, those dissatisfied left the district.

The National Center for Educational Statistics (1995), found that students from affluent families were more likely to attend schools chosen by their parents than those from poor families. However, Black students were more likely than White students to attend a school selected by their parents. Of the families surveyed, Black families more often sent students to public school than their White counterparts. Parents whose children were enrolled in chosen or private schools

expressed more satisfaction with the programs associated with that school choice when compared to the parents whose children attended assigned public schools.

Patricia Lines (1993), argued against the notion that only economically advantaged families got the best schools and that racial and socioeconomic segregation increased with school choice. Parent information levels, however, were crucial if the premise was that school choice would better match the child to the school. She forwarded that argument as she revised data coming from the Alum Rock research in California. Lines pointed out that the first report out of Alum Rock indicated significant informational inequities among parents. Research at the time threw out data from the Spanish speaking parents because of perceived problems with validity. Lines, challenging the validity question, re-included the original data and found that given comparable information, less educated and minority parents could become as knowledgeable as other more advantaged parents on basic questions of school choice; they would choose if given the information. Danielle Dunne's study (1991), of another population concluded just the opposite. She supported the contentions of school choice opponents who viewed it as difficult, if not impossible, for limited English speaking or poorly educated parents to make the necessary informed decisions regarding school choice.

The research done by Tyler Weaver (1992), repeated Lines' convictions. Studying the Parent Informational Centers made available to the parents in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he found those centers were essential to parents who

were then expected to make educated school choice decisions. Glenn (1990),

uncovered the same necessity as he researched Massachusetts schools.

Kim Yap (1991), studied the highly successful Learning Center Program

initiated in Hawaii in January of 1987. Her data showed the programs, while well

accepted by participants and their parents, too unfamiliar to many. She

recommended a more systematic approach to publicize the program so that parents

and students actually availed themselves of the school choice options.

Douglas Archbald (1996), detected that parents of all ethnic and social

backgrounds must have access to information when school choice is extended. His

study also demonstrated that parent educational and income levels were the best

predictors to compensate for insufficient information in the selection process.

Yancey and Saporito (1995), looked at racial and socioeconomic factors in

Houston and Philadelphia. They wanted to determine why students tended to

segregate in schools in those two cities. They reviewed census figures, annual

reports from city school districts and achievement scores. Despite differences in

the two cities, they found many similarities in the character and composition of the

two school districts studied. Both districts served high proportions of minority

and poor students. Analysis of the data collected indicated that success in each

school district was indirectly proportional to the number of students coming from

low income families. Other shared characteristics of failure detected by the study

were the withdrawal of financial resources, diminished teacher commitment and

widening disinterest from families and the community about educational issues.

Schneider, Teske, Marschall and Roch (1998), explored the impact of socioeconomic status on school choice selections. Their data indicated that parents of higher socioeconomic status did not necessarily place their children in the best schools. Rather, they detected differences in the "sorting" process used by parents of different socioeconomic backgrounds. Those parents considered in lower socioeconomic levels stressed different values about education and subsequently chose schools they viewed as possessing their own values.

Parents of lower socioeconomic status and parents who identified themselves as racial minorities, were more likely, for example, to value schools that performed what the researchers call the "bedrock" functions of providing a safe environment in which the fundamentals of education were delivered (Schneider et al., 1998). Those fundamentals may have been the focus, because the selecting parents believed that set of essentials would increase the likelihood that their children would be adequately prepared to meet and pass through the "gatekeeping points" on the path to economic success; they would for instance, graduate from high school, get accepted and complete a college program and secure high-paying jobs.

The research concluded that parents with less income or education themselves, do not value academic performance less than parents with higher education; rather less educated parents wanted, for example, academic performance reflected in high test scores on standardized test rather than more abstract and subjective ways of evaluating student performance, say for instance,

student performance portfolios. Differences that emerged because of what these researchers called "sorting", whereby minority or lower socioeconomic parents stressed a different set of values in education, and chose schools reflecting those values, was not the product of "skimming" so often alleged by the critics of school choice policy. Rather, the actions stressed differing values in education and selections reflecting those differing dimensions.

Martinez and associates (1994), also conducted research on who was choosing. Their studies focused on five school districts. Three of the districts received public funds: St. Paul, San Antonio and Milwaukee. Two were private: Indianapolis and San Antonio. The five districts chosen each developed school choice programs targeted at low income and minority families. One question investigated, given such targeted programs, was why weren't the numbers reflecting service by each district larger? Data from San Antonio, Indianapolis and Milwaukee suggested that the low income parents who chose had more extensive educational levels, higher incomes and were less likely to be unemployed than the low income parent who did not choose. Additionally, researchers reported that families participating in school choice were more likely to participate in religious activities at least once a week when compared to the non-choosing families.

Data from Martinez and associates (1994), found that the reasons most often mentioned for parents to choosing a school were educational quality and learning climate. Discipline and general school atmosphere also rated high. The Carnegie Report (1992), instead found that most of the parents cited non-academic

reasons for their school choice decisions. Only one-third of the Iowa parents who responded in the Carnegie Report marked educational benefits as their rationale for submitting open enrollment forms. Reasons more frequently checked in that study were school location, school environment and convenience. Only 15 % of those changing schools through the open enrollment plan offered identified academic quality as the reason for transfer. Uchitelle's study (1993), found that the over-riding, singular issue in school choice decisions became whether or not transportation was available with a school choice selection.

Jennifer Baird (1990), surveyed 1,000 of the 9,000 families in the East Baton Rouge (LA) Parish School system. Respondents were asked to rank eight indicators of school choice from most important to least important. Open-ended questions also were included. Results of the survey showed that the primary parental choice factors were location in relationship to home, a school's public perception or "face" value and leadership, staff abilities and qualifications. Racial composition also was mentioned occasionally as a contributing factor.

Wilson and others (1992), surveyed 900 parents using the same factors for selection criteria as used in the 1990 Phi Delta Kappan Gallup poll. The Wilson study found that a school's reputation, racial and ethnic composition of the school, and the proximity to home were the three most important factors for selecting parents. In contrast the Phi Delta Kappan Gallup poll found quality of teaching staff and maintenance of student discipline the most important factors. School

reputation, student body diversity, and location were the least significant in the Phi Delta Kappan Gallup study.

Additional data from the five districts studied by Martinez and associates (1994), shed light on what expectations preceded school choice decisions. Overall, parents in Milwaukee said they held high expectations for their children. More of the choosing parents than non-choosing expected their children to go to college or do post-graduate work. In San Antonio, more striking expectations surfaced from the data collected. There, one-half of the choosing families expected children to attend graduate or professional schools while only 17 % of the non-choosers expected graduate work. One-fourth of the non-choosing parents expected that their children would attain only a high school diploma. Choosing multi-lingual families showed 4 % expecting only a high school diploma, while 3 % of the choosing corporate executive families had only the diploma expectation.

Martinez and associates (1994), concluded that a lack of awareness in school choice options became a formidable obstacle for some low-income families. However, for those who knew about the school choice options, educational quality became a priority. Most of the families selecting school choice expressed frustration with the public educational system and when asked to evaluate that prior experience, gave it failing marks. Low income families also wanted good schools for their children and made great sacrifices to achieve those goals if they had adequate information about school choice. The researchers lamented the

likelihood that many critics of school choice would focus on the fact that non-choosing parents were different from choosing parents, especially with regard to socioeconomic and educational levels and overall expectations for their children. What they then posed was a significant question. How would school choice affect student learning and family satisfaction over time when all other variables including selection bias remained controlled?

Bauch and Small (1986), developed a topology with four dimensions for categorizing the reasons parents gave for selecting private schools. Academic criteria was overwhelmingly the most common response given. Comparing the criteria used by parents selecting private schools to the criteria used by parents selecting public schools, Kutner, Sherman and Williams (1986), found varied results. Twenty-five percent of the parents said that the school to which they were assigned was the determinant, 24 % said transportation decided the selection and 17 % indicated that the academic quality of the selected school explained their decision. Private school parents on the other hand identified academic quality (42 %) as the rationale for their school choice. Additionally, 30 % of the private school parents cited religious instruction and 12 % said that discipline expectations affected their decisions.

Nearly one half of the children in the study now attending private schools had once attended public schools and 17 % of those attending public schools had once attended private schools. Reasons given for switching from private to public schools included 24 % who said cost was a factor, 21 % who noted a change in

residence and 17 % who said that other public school alternatives became available. Reasons for switching from public to private schools included 27 % with higher academic expectations, 25 % for discipline standards, 25 % because of religious education or values orientation and 12 % because the quality of the teachers was perceived as better (Kutner, Sherman and Williams, 1986).

Kutner and associates (1986), discovered that respondents with a child in private school tended to be better educated, earn a higher income, be Catholic, have attended private schools themselves and lived in large or medium-size cities. The parents who sent their children to public schools were more likely to live in non-metropolitan environs and attended public school themselves. The researchers concluded that for any given level of funding, access and school choice would be expanded most for low-income and minority families by increasing the proportion of tuition eligible students.

Zhang (1995), investigated the attitudes of parents who had switched their children among public neighborhood schools, public magnet schools and parochial schools. He obtained information on attitudes about curriculum, school-parent relationships and values in schooling. He found significant differences in opinions only with respect to values. Parents transferring their children from public to parochial schools placed greater emphasis on a curriculum that stressed moral values and religion. Parents transferring their children from parochial schools to public schools placed greater importance on cultural diversity.

Bauch and Goldring (1995), studied metropolitan high schools in Chicago, Washington, DC and Chattanooga, Tennessee. They detected multiple reasons for parents selecting any particular school. While Catholic parents placed high priority on the school's academic reputation, they also were concerned about moral development and discipline. The profiled values of the parents selecting single-focus magnet schools were similar to those of the parents choosing Catholic schools except that they did not give such a high priority to moral development. Multi-focused magnet schools were chosen frequently by minority families; their primary motivation for choosing being academic considerations. Minority parents also transferred children to other schools for career, transportation and proximity reasons.

Lee, Croninger and Smith (1994), surveyed the attitudes of parents in the Detroit metropolitan area. Parents supported the notion that school choice would reduce the socioeconomic stratification and those most disadvantaged socially were the strongest supporters of that idea. Favorable attitudes toward school choice seemed to be inversely related to the quality rating parents gave to their local school system. The paradox detected was that parents in districts of perceived quality were less interested in school choice and less likely to give others seeking school choice an opportunity to choose a premium district. Conclusions from the researchers, were that although disadvantaged families might view school choice as a means to better educate their children, and although school choice

could benefit a few children and their families, the overall effect of a school choice plan would be to increase rather than decrease the social stratification in education.

Giving credence to the Lee and associates study, Fossey (1994), studied Massachusetts schools after the state legislature in 1991 passed legislation which allowed students choice outside their own district. While districts were not required to accept outside students, there were financial incentives for doing so. Fossey, studying the natural flow for the first year of the implementation, found that students switched to schools with higher expenditure levels and higher student achievement in communities with higher socioeconomic populations. Only 15 % of the state schools districts accepted school choice students however, and no suburban districts within convenient commuting distance of Boston participated in the program (Fossey, 1994).

Consequently only fifteen Boston students out of 60,000 transferred under the program. Only 4 % of the 3,000 school choice students were Afro-American or Hispanic. Even in districts with large minority populations, most of the students who transferred were White. Fossey concluded that families seemed to be making informed decisions when transferring children out of home communities and were not transferring for reasons of mere convenience (Fossey, 1994). The Massachusetts choice plan improved schooling options for a few students, but it was not effective in increasing the heterogeneity of the schools.

Glenn (1993), also conducted a three year study of the Massachusetts schools. The school's quality and the location were most important to parents

selecting a school. Glenn elaborated on both of these findings, giving some perspective to his research. He found that parents gave a broad definition to the idea of school quality and actually what they seemed most interested in was the school's perceived quality. Additionally, for most parents, location not only meant close proximity, but also indicated whether or not the school was located within a safe neighborhood.

Witte (1993), studied families participating in a voucher program initiated in the Milwaukee public schools. He found that the participants who came from poor, often single-parent households, were not doing well academically in the Milwaukee Public Schools, and that their parents expressed dissatisfaction with their schools the children had previously attended. In spite of all these findings, the number of school choice families was smaller than those who chose to stay in the Milwaukee Public Schools. The voucher parents, particularly the mothers, were more educated, had higher expectations for their children and were more likely to work at home with their children on educationally related problems. They, as a group, displayed higher rates of participation in their children's education when compared to the average Milwaukee Public School parent.

In weighing the evidence from numerous studies, Levin (1990), concluded that the empirical data supported the interpretation that school choice schemes, whether market or public, tend to favor more advantaged families. Those findings were also supported by Ambler (1994), as he analyzed school choice in Britain, France and the Netherlands. There, school choice increased the educational gap

between the privileged and the underprivileged, primarily because the students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to exercise the prerogative of school choice. When subsidies were provided to private education, higher income families derived the greater benefit.

Many of the researchers studying school choice populations, even those who detected either widening gaps or uneven participation as a result of the extended school choice alternatives, however, did not recommend abandoning school choice. Instead, many like Alder (1993), called for a better balance between the rights of parents to choose and the duties of education authorities to promote education for all students. He called for procedures whereby parents, given the help of professional educators, could make more informed choices in the selection of schools that would best promote their own child's learning. He said school choice policies should, however be formulated to protect the legitimate collective, concerns of society regarding equity, a necessity he maintained the market model advocates seemed to have avoided.

In summary, most of the studies of choosing parent populations clearly demonstrated that academic, moral and religious concerns dominated the selection process. If given the choice, nearly all parents tended to select schools perceived as better than the ones their children previously attended. That reality supported the claims made by the market advocates who maintained that school choice would be the force for improving the quality of schools in general.

Parents served by schools in low-income areas wanted school choice more than parents served by schools in generally high-income areas. Those serviced by the higher income schools were not as likely, however, to open up their schools to others. School choice opponents, particularly those disputing the market model rationale saw this reluctance as proof of their own arguments that school choice policies would make an already inequitable system even more unfair. One mitigating factor might be that the public school system in the United States, since publicly supported through tax dollars, must function under the equal protection provisions of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution. Moreover, as noted earlier, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (1994), recognized that most school choice implementations have made explicit attempts to design school choice policies that were socially just. Still, issues of equity remained unresolved.

Others suggested that school choice would work only if parents took full advantage of the alternatives made available (Glenn, 1990; Elmore, 1990; Lee et al., 1994). Some parents would make use of the new opportunities, but other would not. Unfortunately, the parents of children with the greatest need for improved educational opportunities might experience the greatest difficulty in taking advantage of the school choice options tendered. That potentiality clearly demonstrated the need for some type of systemic reform if school choice was to make some significant difference and result in the desired reforms.

Prior Montclair Research

Since Montclair, New Jersey, was one of the few school district in the
United States implementing full-scaled magnet designation in the 1970s,
substantial research of the district exists. While many of those prior investigations
stipulated purposes different from the current examination and while they
described circumstances at different time intervals, their review nonetheless
amplified this study. That earlier research chronicled many aspects Montclair's
sustained school choice policy. With the exception of the last three studies
reviewed, all were done by outside researchers not well-acquainted with Montclair
who instead inspected circumstances from a distance.

Laura Ferguson (1987), examined Montclair as one of twenty-one schools
within eleven states which provided what she determined to be exemplary parent
information strategies supporting school choice decisions. The racial breakdowns
detected at the time in the public schools were 51 % White, 46 % Black, 2 %
Hispanic and 1 % other; the total Montclair Public School population numbered
5,200 students. Parent information centers, along with brochures, open houses
and spring meetings in the morning and evening hours all contributed to successful
school choice recruitment in the district (Ferguson, 1987). Parents commented
that principals were available to talk with them and that the district provided town-
wide meetings which summarized the options available. Ferguson noted significant
parent involvement in schools throughout the district and found the district
understanding and cooperative with regard to school choice decisions. A major

recommendation from her study was that parent outreach programs should continue a willingness to service non-traditional parents and make staff available on a one-to-one basis where and whenever parents appeared (Ferguson, 1987).

Montclair was also cited as a successful school choice program by Bamber (1990). Noting the seven previous failed attempts at desegregation -- one including forced busing -- through which Montclair had already maneuvered, Bamber discovered in 1990 what she viewed as an equitable school choice plan. It was one of five in the nation she highlighted in her research. The success of the newest Montclair plan hinged, according to Bamber, on the designation of Glenfield, in the predominately Black neighborhood as the gifted and talented magnet middle school, while the basic middle school program was relocated to Mount Hebron, in a predominantly White neighborhood. Bamber reported that 95 % of the students got their first choice in Montclair and that transportation, provided by the district, clearly formed a crucial component around the district's success. She did not see White flight as a problem although Montclair typified a community where the family income was high. The minority population, estimated at 49 % in her study, included many Afro-American professionals.

The Carnegie Foundation for Advancement in Teaching (1992), also looked at schools of choice across the nation. Their findings, after interviews with one thousand parents in public schools from fifty states, found that school choice, especially district-wide programs, could stimulate renewal, but school choice alone was unlikely to reform the nation's schools. Montclair, again one of three

programs cited by the study, was dubbed a district with a successful school choice implementation. Montclair's success was demonstrated by circumstances promoting equal access for all, effective outreach programs, and fair funding processes. The report concluded that for all districts to be successful, the focus needed to turn from the empowerment of individuals and instead concentrate on building community within the targeted district or system.

Young and Clinchy (1992), identified diversity, autonomy, and equity as the components necessary for reform in the nation's schools. After looking at various school choice options, they found that controlled choice when paired with magnets was the best approach to educational reform. Montclair, along with two other districts, were named as successful plans utilizing that pairing. Montclair reflected almost a "50-50" racial balance achieved through the goals of voluntary desegregation initiated through this school choice policy. The study found that the diversified magnet programs in Montclair also raised student achievement.

Echoing the idea that no one school was right for every child or teacher, the study corroborated beliefs that school choice could lead to true diversity and excellence (Young & Clinchy, 1992). In Montclair, researchers found that 90 % of the families got their first choice after listing two preferences and that there were no academic criteria restricting admissions. Special education students were included in the Montclair program. Parents interviewed reflected that it was difficult to choose a school for younger children because their abilities and learning styles were still evolving. The parent information centers were also viewed as

helpful to parents. Researchers said the greatest strength of Montclair's school choice program was the level of participation by parents. In Montclair, researchers found that three-fourths of the parents participated in some type of informational meeting before making their school choice selection. While published literature from the district was abundant and easily accessed, 89 % of the parents indicated they also just talked to others when contemplating a school choice selection.

The Young and Clinchy study in 1992, portrayed Montclair parents as very educated consumers. Furthermore, researchers detected a strong entrepreneurial spirit among educators in Montclair. School choice policies, the researchers noted, however, were not free of cost. Montclair maintained a firm commitment to desegregation and provided the needed resources to shore up weakened programs and maintain promising ventures. Most dramatically, that commitment to diversity was manifest in Montclair's extensive busing plan. The district provided transportation to almost half of the student population. Other districts in the state typically provided transportation to only ten to fifteen percent of the student population. The cost to the district of maintaining the transportation plan was estimated at $1.5 million each year.

Indications of a solid funding base also were revealed by the $7478 per student allocations in the budget expenditures (Young & Clinchy, 1992). The district, in addition, regularly received between $1.5 and $2.5 million each year in desegregation funds from the state and federal government. In 1992, however, the

district lost that funding and as a result summer school programs were reduced and senior teachers were offered early retirement incentives.

The largest challenge for Montclair was to bring academic excellence to all students (Young & Clinchy, 1992). On the average, in the spring of 1988, Montclair students in grade 2 through grade 8 scored between the 84th and 95th percentile on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Test scores for minority students alone lagged somewhat below that level. To address that disparity, an office of minority achievement was established. Heartening results were recorded by 1991, when twelve out of seventy National Honor Society award recipients were minority students, up from just one student three years earlier. Non-White acceptances to colleges also increased from 50 % before 1988 to 59 % in June 1991. While still significantly below the 82 % White student acceptance rate, improvement was noted, but the data also demonstrated that school choice alone could not solve the dilemma entirely. Finally, researchers attributed Montclair's compact geographic area; a highly educated, relatively affluent and open-minded parent population; skilled school leadership; an experienced staff; and bountiful state and federal funding as crucial determinants for Montclair's success with regard to school choice. The district was identified as having a unique, urban, highly educated population, not afraid to integrate.

The most expansive study of Montclair was conducted in 1990. It was a case study using quantitative data from standardized test scores, enrollment reports, census data and qualitative data from reports and documents, interviews,

and observations. The study was done for the Educational Testing Service Policy Information Center by researchers Clewell and Joy (1990). Their research investigated the extent to which Montclair had achieved three pre-determined district goals: desegregation (racial balance), diverse educational programs and improved academic achievement.

Researchers found that Montclair embodied many factors associated with successful school choice implementations (Clewell & Joy, 1990). The size of the district in itself made school choice easier. The affluent, highly educated and diverse community was supportive of equity goals and educational quality. While only 18 % of the population had children in the public school setting, the community at large was willing to pay the taxes necessary to support the system and its goals. Montclair, situated in a suburban setting, did not encounter many of the problems associated with urban school choice plans. Resources within the district were quickly equalized across the schools and assignments proceeded on a voluntary basis connected to school choice, a factor essential in achieving racial balance.

The efforts of the superintendent toward building community support and demonstrating that the schools were careful in their uses of resources attributed to the vast public support Montclair Schools enjoyed (Clewell & Joy, 1990). The success of the Montclair plan, however, involved more than favorable circumstances and population characteristics. Those planning the school choice implementation produced a welcoming environment and provided support for the

system. Remembering the disasters which followed the previous attempts to desegregate, particularly the attempt involving forced busing, helped to develop community interest and involvement in the new plan. Placing the gifted and talented magnets in predominately Black neighborhoods and the basic or fundamental magnets in more White neighborhoods proved a strategy effective at achieving voluntary desegregation. Extensive renovation of schools in minority areas also enhanced their attractiveness to White parents.

Inspecting the extent to which the district had achieved its own goals through school choice, Clewell and Joy (1990), found varying results. Data demonstrated that 95 % of the parents were receiving their choice in schools. Over half of the student population was bused to their respective schools indicating that many parents were also choosing outside their own neighborhoods. Racial balance manifest since school choice had been extended in that all schools had achieved between 46 % and 52 % minority enrollment. Classrooms in the elementary schools seemed racially balanced; however, in honors and advanced classes at both the middle school and high school level, minority students were noticeably underrepresented. The staff was racially diverse; one-third of the administrators, teachers and supervisors were minority. Researchers observed an active commitment toward promoting cultural understanding throughout the schools.

Investigating educational quality, Clewell and Joy (1990), found that since school choice started, academic performance, as judged through standardized test

scores, had improved. Although other factors may have contributed to the improved scores, indications were that school choice did not cause those scores to decline and may in fact have been a factor in their improvement. Large differences, however, between minority and non-minority scores were detected. School climates were judged favorable for learning; discipline was firm but not rigid; and principals were held accountable for their individual school's performance. Principals clearly set the tone for individual schools, and parents, students and teachers all expressed satisfaction with the schools. Ongoing curriculum review and continued program monitoring was also observed.

Program diversity was probably the major attraction for parents in Montclair. The variety of magnets allowed them to choose a situation most appropriate for their child. Program style, climate, environment and school leadership were the criteria also most often mentioned in the selection process. Many parents appeared to choose after their children completed second grade. The preference seemed to be for retaining younger children in a school closer to home and once some idea of individual style and strengths emerged, to then initiate the school choice selection. Thus, location also became an important criteria. Facilities, size and over-all atmosphere were also cited as factors influencing school choice. Several principals and teachers suggested that many parents chose schools that sounded impressive, gifted and talented for example, with little actual knowledge about specific school offerings (Clewell & Joy, 1990).

While Montclair as a district embodied many of the factors research has associated with thriving magnets and successful desegregation efforts, a combination of fortuitous circumstances and informed, intelligent decisions predisposed the district for success (Clewell & Joy, 1990). Carefully planning of the initial implementation and continued monitoring of that implementation all elevated the district's accomplishments. Clearly the actions taken by Montclair may not be feasible for all other districts depending on particular demographics and other characteristics. However, community involvement and support could be components in any other plan irrespective of the other differences to Montclair. The Montclair model, while still struggling with minority achievement and minority representation in the most challenging academic programs, did provide a concrete model of effectiveness.

Three other researchers, each focusing more on parents' selecting criteria, examined Montclair. In 1989, Barbara Strobert surveyed 183 parents of new students during the annual registration week. Parents were asked to identify the factors that influenced their school choice decision. Of the respondents, 71 % cited the recommendation of a friend as a factor influencing school choice. About 50 % said that the building environment was a factor while only 3 % mentioned achievement as a concern. When subsequently asked to identify the single most important factor for their school choice decision, 30 % responded building atmosphere, 19 % curriculum approach, and 14 % the recommendation of a friend or neighbor (Strobert, 1989).

Earlier, in 1986, Patricia Schwartz studied selected Montclair parents as part of her doctoral dissertation at Columbia University. The research examined why parents who could make choices within the public school system decided instead to send their children to private schools. The most prevalent factors influencing that decision were quality of teaching staff, academic standards, and an emphasis on civic and moral values (Schwartz, 1986).

Finally, in 1991, Barbara Strobert again investigated Montclair for her dissertation study. The purpose of the study was to examine how parents, when offered a choice for their child's elementary schooling, decided on a particular school. To uncover how the decision was made, information was gathered on how parents became aware of the school choice options, the extent of their search, and the factors that influenced the final choice. A questionnaire was given to parents registering children for the first time in Montclair and interviews proceeded with selected parents whose children had been in the public schools for almost one year.

The data collected was analyzed from two perspectives. First, comparisons were made among diverse parent groups. Secondly, the data was compared to published earlier research. The findings suggested that most parents engaged in active and extensive searches. While differences were demonstrated among groups based on racial and socioeconomic patterns, all parents seemed to personalize the process of school selection (Strobert, 1991).

Higher income, better educated families used more sources of information before their decisions than did less advantaged families. There was considerable

variation in the awareness of school choice options; higher income families were better informed than lower income families. Higher income families and White parents, regardless of their income status, put more reliance on printed materials to learn about school choice than did lower income or non-White families. For all parent sub-populations, the dominant source of information was talking to others. Location did not appear as a dominant factor in the selection process. Strobert concluded that overall school quality, described as "school culture," seemed to have the most pervasive influence on the final choice decisions (Strobert, 1991). Instructional approach, reputation of the staff and magnet theme were also identified frequently by parents as influential in school choice decisions.

<div align="center">Chapter Summary</div>

A review of related and relevant literature formed the framework or theoretical base for examining the research questions connected to this study of school choice. Theory established the expectations for analyzing and evaluating data collected as a result of this case study, facilitated the formation of rival theories to judge the same evidence, and directed generalizations from situations similar to Montclair where context was important and variables uncontrolled.

First, the literature review examined conditions underlying the current resurgence of school choice and then presented arguments rationalizing school choice as a strategy for educational reform. That conceptual background was included to define the context surrounding the contemporary school choice initiatives. It provided a perspective detailing the evolution of the current school

choice movement, assessed its anticipated impact and delineated the philosophical assumptions supporting the extended opportunities for parental selection where school choice was offered. It also presented the rationale from critics who rejected either the policies of school choice or the arguments tendered in its defense. Notwithstanding the contentions of those school choice critics, there was ample documentation that some of the strategies used to organize and govern schools when school choice policies were put into effect, were strategies, which if implemented elsewhere, could result in superior schools. Among the promising outcomes, when school choice strategies were implemented, were the acquisition of social capital and the resulting beneficial relationship between small school size and school quality.

The next section of the literature review summarized the empirical data from other researched populations of school choice. Prominent findings of that research pointed to the necessity for adequate dissemination of information to parents about the school choice options available, and the affect of a family's social class on educational decision making. The earliest data suggested more educated parents with higher incomes were most likely to choose, and that their criteria for selection likely would focus on non-instructional factors including location, perceived school quality, atmosphere of the school or transportation accessibility. More recent studies demonstrated that given enough information, all parents could choose and take advantage of the opportunities school choice promised. While that research indicated that parents tried to make some match between the selected

school and their child's needs, there was also clear confirmation that school choice alone would not bring educational reforms. Also, a significantly large segment of the parent population did not choose even when given the opportunity.

The research emphasized that distinct populations of parents have differing abilities and motivations regarding school choice. Contrasting values and cultural or social beliefs all distinguished individual, choosing, parent populations. Policymakers and school officials alike could not assume that the most popular or even the most innovative options were always the best or the most desired. School choice options built around consonant, educational instruction or themes might prove more valuable and eventually more successful. School choice, moreover, even if designed to redress inequities, could intensify those inequities.

Recent research examining choosing, parent populations suggested that academic concerns, and moral and religious values were the factors mentioned most frequently by parents as the determinants of school choice. School choice plans utilizing controlled choice to achieve racial balance could exacerbate, inadvertently, already unequal circumstances. Indications were that especially motivated, capable parents, with time and expertise to work the system, actually benefited most from the extended options for school choice. Parents provided with school choice options seemed less inclined to extend those same opportunities to other parents. Additionally, the parents of children with the greatest need for the improved educational opportunity which school choice promised, might also experience the greatest difficulty in taking advantage of the choices offered.

School choice plans tended to favor more advantaged families regardless of racial background; when subsidies were provided for private education, higher income families derived the greatest benefit. Instead of abandoning school choice altogether, most researchers called for establishing a better balance between the parents' right to choose and strategies initiated by the professional community toward educational enhancement, essentially calling for systemic educational reforms.

The final section of the literature review looked at previous research examining Montclair, New Jersey, the public schools and the district's twenty-three history of school choice. Most of the studies found Montclair had an effective school choice paradigm, described as a unique, urban model, but definitely one with distinct characteristics to explain its accomplishments. The size of the town, the relatively affluent, highly educated and diverse population which supported the goals of school integration and educational equity, were all characteristics enumerated in the published research. The particularly motivated parent population, the district's leadership and support, the experienced staff, ample resources, transportation accessibility, program diversity through magnet designation, and community interest and involvement also contributed to the conspicuously effective model Montclair typified in the research.

School atmosphere, quality of the teaching staff, and academic standards -- all in the category of school culture -- were the factors most mentioned as determinants of school choice for parents in Montclair. Most of the parents in

Montclair seemed to personalize the school choice process and most parents talked

to others about their school choice options. Despite being an example of an

effective school choice plan, Montclair schools still wrestled with a significant

achievement gap between Whites and non-Whites and the under-representation of

minority students in the most academically rigorous classes. The research in the

literature review about Montclair did, however, provide an historical viewpoint

and a measure for comparing and contrasting the anticipated Renaissance School

data.

All the studies in the literature review offered some insight and a standard

of comparison against which to analyze and evaluate the data about who was

choosing Renaissance School and the factors affecting that decision. However,

caution followed the inspection of that review literature; it is important not to

construct broad generalizations. Each researched case in the literature reflected a

unique school choice situation and described the differing motivations of individual

districts in establishing school choice plans. The research presented varied

schemes of school choice in districts at differing levels of school choice

implementation.

Data from those investigations did, however, offer some understanding of

the parent decision making process when educational choice was available.

Certainly, the patterns that were recorded in the literature review will be

contrasted with the collected Renaissance School data. Will the Renaissance

School population then display characteristics typical of those choosing

populations in the literature? Will the theoretical conjectures highlighted in the literature review be manifest in the Renaissance School population or will other conclusions result? Chapter Four will present the findings from the examination of school choice at the Renaissance School. Chapter Five will analyze, interpret and evaluate those findings, partially as they compare to choosing populations documented elsewhere.

CHAPTER III

Research Design and Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify and analyze the criteria employed by an identified suburban/urban population as they exercised extended options afforded through school choice toward admission of their children to a public middle school. The population selected came from families who chose the Renaissance School in Montclair, New Jersey, over the course of three years since its formation. Published research has confirmed that parent choice and the criteria utilized to make those choices are essential ambient factors toward determining the success of any school choice implementation (Yanofsky & Young, 1992). Outcomes from this study will increase our knowledge about that aspect of school choice now under consideration, and might even point to strategies for expediting or enhancing the entire school choice process. Five research questions focused this particular investigation of parent choice and the selection criteria utilized. They were:

1. Who chooses the Renaissance Middle School?

2. What criteria were used to make that selection?

3. Are there detectable relationships between those selecting the Renaissance School and the criteria they use?

4. Does the Renaissance School population display characteristics typically ascribed to researched, choosing populations elsewhere or are there differences?

5. Are the theoretical conjectures highlighted throughout current literature made evident by this examined population or do other conclusions result?

<u>The Need for Design and Methodology</u>

While the research questions inventoried above focused this study, research design and methodology framed, directed and integrated the investigation. Design successively directed how the study advanced, the steps. Those steps were the plan for the study and gave a logical sequence to the intended research procedures. Methodology determined the study's ultimate contextual style, the form. The form or selected methodology positioned the study within a particular research framework so that the significance of the findings and the resulting interpretations could be understood.

Just as an architect draws fastidious and precise plans before construction, the researcher conceptualizes an overall design, before commencing research (Leddy, 1997). That process, or step by step sequencing of the intended research, is assembled around theory emanating from the published literature. Theory, therefore, through design, affected the blueprint.

Theory also directed the methodology. Analogous to the architect suggested before, no blueprint is drafted until the desired style of construction, from classic Georgian to contemporary split level, is determined. Similarly, the researcher must decide the preferred or anticipated shape of the project based on the information solicited from the research problem. What is the desired form? What kind of data will be presented and how is the problem posed? What kinds of

questions need answers? Responses to those queries determined methodology. Methodology refined the framework, or defining context, for this study of school choice (Leddy, 1997). Methodology determined along with theory, as revealed in the literature, what data would be presented so meaning could emerge.

In addition, every researcher carefully selects methodology depending on the demands of the data presented or requested. A researcher investigating white blood cell counts for patients diagnosed with leukemia as they undergo therapy with interferon will not require the same type of data as that which might be obtained from focus groups or individual interviews evaluating the current public support for marijuana legalization. Methodology, however, is not determined by academic discipline alone, rather by that ceaseless shifting of research intent or data exhibition (Leddy, 1997).

Design and Methodology Considerations of the Current Study

Once the considerations of conventional research design and methodology have been illustrated and clarified, attention can turn to the current study about school choice. Numerous contextual conditions overlapped in the school choice process observed at the Renaissance School, and consequently, a descriptive case study was the selected methodology for this study (Yin, 1993). Investigating school choice at the Renaissance School revealed a phenomenon abounding in variables, all intrinsically connected and sometimes indistinguishable from that correlated context (Yin, 1993); relationships were not always clear or linear. Case study expedited the inspection of those variables in the real life, placed them in

context and thus revealed the relationships among those variables. Furthermore, the case study methodology allowed for the collection of qualitative and quantitative data about both the context and the variables.

However, this abundance of context did present certain technical challenges. Many variables that were detected were unclear or even unknown, for as Yin (1993), pointed out, case study methodology often reveals more variables than actual data points. As typical case study also presumes, those variables were neither manipulated nor controlled within the current investigation. The same abundance of context also meant that the study could not rely on a single data collection method but required, instead, various data from multiple sources (Yin, 1993). That specific design strategy strengthened the construct validity for the study. Finally, even when distinguished variables were quantitative, there was a need for distinct plans of research design and data analysis to deal with those variables. Formal protocols, a comprehensive data base, identified units of analysis, theory formation, pattern-matching, chain of evidence and triangulation all enhanced the rigorous validity and reliability strategies necessary to manage the contextual circumstances connected to this qualitative study.

Yet another challenge was presented in this descriptive case study; at the end, the data collected by the study would be evaluated. Conveniently, the case study format had built in evaluative characteristics to support the need to assess outcomes and test theory. By incorporating the investigation of context into the research, case study satisfied the need to monitor and assess both school choice

and the context in which it occurred (Yin, 1993). Secondly, by allowing, if not encouraging, collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, the evaluation could incorporate both varieties of evidence into the research findings (Yin, 1993). Finally, through prior theoretical formulation and rival theory formation, case study established a framework of predictable patterns or events against which the detected Renaissance School data then could be judged (Yin, 1993).

The outcomes of the evaluation then became the main vehicle for developing generalizations from situations similar to the Renaissance School case study. They also allowed the generalizations to become a part of the cumulative knowledge base about school choice rather than an isolated inquiry. They exposed what Yin (1993), called the demonstration project's "theory". That theory was critical to understanding school choice, the subject of the study. If ignored, the investigation and evaluation would fail to clarify "what is being demonstrated" about school choice (Yin, 1993).

The GAO (U. S. General Accounting Office), (1987/1991), recognized the effectiveness of case study design for program evaluation. Their own guidelines, predominately based on Yin's work, outlined procedures and concepts like the utilization of multiple sources of evidence, establishment of a chain of evidence, triangulation, reliance on pattern-matching and explanation building as major analytical strategies and evaluation techniques associated with successful case study research.

Comprehensive methodology and design concerns for the current study have been addressed. Specifics regarding the instrumentation and the other sources of evidence, the population identified and selected for study, the data collection and presentation, and the data analysis and evaluation for the Renaissance School study about school choice, are detailed next.

Instrumentation and Other Sources of Evidence

Study survey.

A pre-addressed, stamped enveloped was mailed to the study population along a study survey and the Informed Consent Form. That mailing also included a solicitation letter (See Appendix A), from the researcher to the selected study population, requesting their participation in the Renaissance School study. Two designated objectives of the current study were to determine who was choosing at the Renaissance Middle School (demographic information), and what were the criteria used to formulate that decision. It was determined that both qualitative and quantitative data were necessary to acquire answers to those questions (Welch & Comer, 1988). The survey instrument (School Choice Study Survey), was developed to obtain some of the necessary data. The first section, Part I, of that survey (See Appendix B), asked for data concerning student gender, student ethnicity, feeder school, the parent level of educational attainment, and total household income level. While the principle units of analysis for the study remained the parents and the criteria they utilized in school choice decisions, defining information about the associated student was also collected as an

elaboration about the choosing parents or embedded units (Yin, 1993). Part I of the survey solicited information about five of the identified demographic variables that were included in the school choice study.

The demographic variables included in the survey coincided with variables investigated in other researched populations; they were presented as influencing factors to school choice decisions. The inclusion of these variables allowed this study to compare data about parents choosing the Renaissance School to data reviewed from those other parent populations. The questions about the demographic variables were close-ended; additionally educational level and household income inquiries were accordingly marked as optional, but useful, if completed.

The second section, Part II, of the survey asked both closed and open ended questions about school choice selection criteria, again inspecting issues similar to those examined in other researched populations. The first question, close-ended, presented a list of twelve commonly identified reasons for school choice. Parents were asked to check whether the reasons listed would constitute very important, important or not important reasons for them in school choice decisions. The second, third and fourth questions about selection criteria were all open-ended, each soliciting additional and ever more specific information about the criteria parents used when selecting a school for their children.

Question number two from the survey asked parents to list any other criteria, not presented in the check list from question one, they considered

important in school choice decisions. Question three asked parents to identify the most important single criteria associated with their own school choice decision. Question four asked parents to list the three best things about the Renaissance School, their school of choice. A final space on the survey solicited comments from the respondents regarding their own understandings about who was choosing the Renaissance School or what criteria was used to formulate that decision. The questions in Part II of the survey collected data about fifteen selection criteria variables associated with this school choice study.

Barbara Strobert's survey, used in her 1991 research examining school choice in Montclair, was particularly helpful in designing the second, or criteria section of this study's survey. Although her research focused on a different choosing population, the questions presented in her survey instrument provided models easily adapted for this study's survey. In drafting the survey for this study, research requirements focused on the specific structure of the survey. Were the items included directly related to what was being measured in the study? Were the directions clear and was the length of the survey appropriate? Were the questions properly formatted? (Welch & Comer, 1988). These were some of the same survey specifications outlined in the Strobert study (1991), and their stipulations correspondingly corroborated the reliability and validity issues connected to the formation of this study's survey.

Dr. Bernadette Anand, principal at the Renaissance School, reviewed a preliminary version of the school choice survey and, as a result, minor revisions

were made along with an initial draft of the focus group questions. The focus group would allow the researcher to expand understanding about the selection criteria data anticipated from the survey instrument and Freedom of Choice documents. The survey, however, provided the initial data about who was choosing at the Renaissance School, along with identifying some of the specified criteria which were used to formulate that decision.

Other sources of evidence.

Along with the survey, parents in the selected study population received Informed Consent Forms (See Appendix C), requesting permission to use not only the aforementioned survey results, but data from archival records and other documents available to the researcher. Collateral records and documents from both the Renaissance School and the Montclair Public Schools supplied additional demographic information about the sample population, actually more embedded units, and additional data regarding selection criteria. That additional data included, free and reduced lunch designations, Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT) scores from 5th grade, Special Education designations, STAR and 504 assignments and individual declarations from the Freedom of Choice documents. The variables produced by this additional data again coincided with variables investigated in other researched, choosing populations. The embedded demographic data presented further elaboration about the sample population associated with the Renaissance School and provided information about seven additional demographic variables included in this study.

The Freedom of Choice documents reviewed, revealed selection criteria designations from the sample, parent population made at the time of their own individual school choice filing. While the second section of the survey had asked the parents to rank selection criteria, in a sense to recall their reasons for choosing, the Freedom of Choice documents recorded criteria indications at the time of the school choice decision. For some, specifically the current eighth grade parent, population, that declaration recorded a criteria formulation almost three years old. The Freedom of Choice document provided information on yet another selection criteria variable within the school choice study.

Using a survey instrument and the various other records and documents as sources of evidence were deliberate data collection designs. The strategy yielded a variety of data about who was choosing and the selection criteria they used from multiple sources, and allowed the researcher to survey and gather information about a large sample in a timely manner. Collectively, the survey instrument and the collateral records and documents provided data on twelve demographic variables, and sixteen selection criteria variables associated with the sample, school choice population from the Renaissance School.

The Informed Consent Forms also requested volunteers interested in participating in the planned focus group designed to further investigate the selection criteria associated with school choice decisions. The general nature of the questions and intended course of inquiry for that focus group were summarized for parents, along with the request for their participation. Use of a focus group

within the research design for this study, provided the opportunity to collect qualitative data about selection criteria in an environment where disclosure could be encouraged and opinions probed. The selection criteria data collected from the focus group remained narrative, unlike the qualitative data associated with selection criteria collected from the surveys and documents, but then converted to numeric indices for purposes of statistical analysis in SPSS.

The original research design anticipated a single focus group session. However, issues connected with sampling, potential selection bias and the possibility of a focus group with a somewhat skewed population, resulted in altered research design. Not only did the selection process for the focus group have to be amended, (See comments in Sample population and focus group selection, pages 121-125), the researcher decided that it was essential to conduct more than just a singular focus group interview.

While two focus groups might not accomplish what Glaser and Strauss (1967), defined as "theoretical saturation," some accommodation was achieved by the design revision to have two focus groups instead of one. Additionally, the researcher discussed the bias concerns with the selected focus group moderator. Strategies resulting from that discussion focused on how management of the actual focus group sessions might in some way compensate for, or at least not intensify, the potential for bias. Secondly, the moderator and the researcher reviewed the focus group questions, the intended purpose of the focus group, and the data expectations of that focus group. It was determined, that despite the areas of

concern, the now revised, paired focus group design would substantially elaborate on the qualitative data about school choice criteria already collected. Aware of the potential bias already highlighted, nonetheless, the decision was made to proceed with two focus groups.

Particularly significant in making the decision to proceed in the manner outlined previously, was the reality that the topic selected for focus group deliberation related to a narrow category of people, all who had relatively the same level of exposure to the policy of school choice (Krueger, 1994). Also important in the decision to proceed with the focus group design as amended was the opportunity to again inspect the purpose first identified for including the focus group strategy into the research design.

Three salient assumptions re-emerged in that additional examination. The purpose for the focus group was not to infer from the data obtained in the focus group, but instead to understand the criteria for selection discussed. The intent was not to generalize from the focus group data obtained, but rather to determine the range and magnitude of the data. Finally, the resulting focus group data would not be used to make statements about the population, but instead to provide insight into their actions regarding school choice.

Additional comments regarding selection bias and sampling are addressed in the sample population section of this chapter (See pages 121-125), and in Chapter Five, when the data from the entire study is analyzed and evaluated, implications cited and recommendations made.

Questions created for the anticipated focus groups (See Appendix D), while open-ended and probing, focused on selection criteria utilized in school choice decision making. The initial draft of those questions, as mentioned before, was developed after the survey was refined. Striving for clarity and preciseness, the drafted focus group questions were first tested on a group of ten parents not related to the study, but familiar with school choice decisions. Minor revisions resulted from that testing.

Attempting to further expand on, and bring insight to the selection criteria data already collected from the survey and document sources, the focus group questions were revised once again after the researcher reviewed a preliminary statistical summary and preliminary crosstabulations from the study's data base pertaining to the selection criteria associated with the sample population.

Focus group participants were asked not to use any identifying comments within the sessions and, therefore, any unintentional identifying comments were deleted from the typed transcripts. The questions formulated for the focus groups allowed participants to express experiences, values, and explain behaviors, while continuously aiming toward perceptible meaning about the selection criteria for school choice.

The focus groups assembled on mutually convenient nights, at agreed on times and places. A research colleague and skilled focus group leader, consented to be the moderator for the Renaissance School focus groups, allowing the researcher the time and opportunity to observe the process. Participation in the

focus groups was voluntary (See comments in Sample population and focus group selection, pages 121-125), and the resulting data was anonymous, known only to the moderator, the researcher and the other focus group participants. Permission was obtained not only to audio tape the focus group sessions, but to later transcribe those recorded discussions into comprehensive transcripts.

Sources of evidence for the school choice case study included survey results, data from archival records, documents from the Renaissance School and the Montclair Public Schools along with the compiled Freedom of Choice documents for the Renaissance School from 1997-1999. The data collected from those sources provided information regarding twelve identified demographic variables and sixteen selection criteria variables associated with this school choice study. Finally, the study data included transcripts from the two focus group interviews conducted on February 29, 2000 and March 1, 2000. Those focus groups, one composed of eight parents, and the other made-up of twelve parents from the sample population, probed the specifics of school choice selection criteria and provided additional data about the selection criteria used by the sample population.

Population for the Study

Population identification.

The subjects of the selected study population were affiliated by activity; all were parents who filed the Freedom of Choice documents as their child entered sixth grade. Each family listed the Renaissance School as their first choice and

each family subsequently was admitted to the school. Commencing in September of 1997, the first year of the school's operation, three discrete classes formed from that Renaissance School selection: one in 1997, one in 1998 and the current sixth grade that assembled in September of 1999.

The study population, originally identified by student name from the 1999-2000 class roosters, then matched to the existing Freedom of Choice documents, excluded any student assigned to the Renaissance School. After inspecting the current class roosters, the researcher detected a peculiarity with seventeen students who had entered the Renaissance School as they began sixth grade. No Freedom of Choice document could be found to correlate with any of those seventeen student names.

Upon closer examination, it was discovered that all seventeen students came from schools other than a public school in Montclair, and had entered the Montclair Public Schools for the first time as they started sixth grade. Application forms subsequently were discovered for all seventeen students, and while those application forms allowed parents to list a preferred school, they did not request a selection criteria from the parents. As a result, those seventeen parents, never having filed the official Freedom of Choice document, were excluded from this study.

The study did not include those selecting the Renaissance School as a first choice, but denied admission. A small number of students initially admitted to the Renaissance School, but then transferring out (See Table 12), along with those

later admitted into available slots as a result of the transfers, were also excluded from the study population. The study population of one hundred seventy-nine parents included fourteen families with two students enrolled at the Renaissance School. Two of those families had twins.

Once identified from the total Renaissance School population of 223 students, the entire study population of 179 subjects was compiled by year of admission into three clusters, then alphabetically sorted within those subgroup clusters onto a master mailing/phone list. Each subject on that master list was assigned a four digit code corresponding to the year of the Renaissance School admission and a tally number within the subgroup, for example 97-01, 97-02, 97-03 and so on.

At the same time, the subjects were entered into a comprehensive, data base for the study, in the same coded, organizational categories. Within the study's data base, there was no record of identity, however, only the four digit code. The mailing/phone list and study data base were then separated and stored independently. Subsequent use of the master mailing/phone list continued only at discretion and need of the researcher.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants could decline or withdraw from the study at any time, and all participants' identities and the data collected remained anonymous. The study had no connection to the researcher's contracted responsibilities to the volunteering participants as a result of her employment by the Montclair Board of Education. All participants were informed

about those conditions and likewise received advice indicating that they could, upon request receive, aggregate results of the Renaissance School research.

<u>Sample population and focus group selection.</u>

By the final cut-off date, February 10, 2000, one hundred parents, 56 % of the study population had returned a survey providing the information requested from the survey and consenting to the use of additional data available from school and district documents relating to their child. They formed the sample population for the study. Additionally, thirty-nine parents, 22 % of the study population, 39 %, volunteered to participate in the planned focus groups. Those volunteering for focus group participation were noted in the data base, and identified with only the assigned four digit code.

The assumption was made by the researcher, that by volunteering to participate in the focus groups, these respondents already had opinions, may be even understandings, about the topic of school choice selection criteria. The risk connected with that assumption was that those opinions might be so well established, so fixed, that they could impede the group dynamics anticipated and necessary for the focus group strategy to be of value when collecting research data.

Additionally, after reviewing the data base information regarding respondents who volunteered for focus group participation, the researcher discovered that only four of the thirty-nine parents who volunteered to participate in the focus groups were non-White. While the sample population itself was only

26 % non-White, the even more lopsided sub-sample of focus group volunteers, now only 10 % non-White, demanded some consideration.

The purpose of the focus group was to examine selection criteria exclusively, not to explore any possible association between demographic characteristics and the selection criteria. Additionally, based on understandings, mostly as a result of the published literature reviewed, the researcher believed that if any detectable variations did emerge when comparing demographic variables with selection criteria variables in crosstabulations, the variations evident would be associated more frequently with the educational and income levels, not exclusively with the race of the sample, parent population. However, not wanting to intensify, with the utilization of the focus group design, an already significant under-representation of non-White respondents in the study, the researcher decided on another amended course of action in the research design, this time redressing the selection process for some of the focus group participants.

The researcher reviewed the sample population, inspecting in particular those parents responding to the survey but not volunteering to participate in the focus groups. Seven, non-White parents were located, each representing varying levels of income and educational attainment. Those parents, identified from the master mailing/phone list, were contacted by telephone. The researcher explained the circumstances prompting the call, and asked those parents to also participate in one of the planned focus group sessions. Six of those parents agreed to the request, and they, together with the four non-White parents initially volunteering,

were evenly apportioned, assigning five non-White parents to each of the anticipated focus group sessions.

From the remaining, initially enlisted focus group volunteers, now numbering thirty-five, and all White, the researcher specifically selected fourteen parents. Four back-ups were simultaneously selected, should their substitution become necessary. Again, carefully inspecting associated educational and income levels for the subjects in the data base, the attempt was to create a diverse sub-sample for focus group participation. Efforts were also directed at selecting parents from each of the sub-clusters associated with year of admission to the Renaissance School, in an attempt to include eighth, seventh and sixth grade parents. From the fourteen White parents selected, seven were assigned to each of the focus group sessions, now joining the five non-White parents already assigned. All the newly chosen White parents were notified regarding their selection. One week before convening the two focus group interviews, all focus group participants received a list of the planned questions and reminders about the purpose of the focus groups along with confirmation of dates, place and times for the focus group sessions.

Selecting focus group participants from a known sample population, instead of a more random selection from the available pool, did not support conventional theories connected to selection bias nor typical attempts at achieving a true cross section. The realized trade-off, however, was that randomization would not have met the researcher's specifications for the focus group formation.

Selecting a total of only twelve parents per focus group, which actually pushed the size limits for the focus group, still represented an extremely small sample of the study population. That reality necessitated that a truly representative group be assembled, taking into account all the known demographic characteristics of the subjects. To ensure that there was diversity within the selected groups beyond the racial issues already addressed, and more importantly, to guarantee that groups would be assembled that might actually interact, the formation specifications necessitated hand picking and composing delineated focus groups; that was the original research design. While it would have been be a fallacy to assume that any one individual could totally "represent" his or her neighborhood, race, culture, socioeconomic group or gender within the focus group (Krueger, 1994), the need to select participants still, however, seemed significant and that was how focus group selection concluded.

Data Collection and Presentation

Data collection.

After receiving institutional and committee approval to conduct the proposed study, a letter was sent from the researcher to Michael Osnato, superintendent of the Montclair Public Schools. That letter requested permission to conduct research about the selected Renaissance School population (See Appendix E).

The School Choice Study Surveys and the Informed Consent Forms were sent by United States mail on January 6, 2000. Along with the surveys and

consent forms, the mailing included a solicitation letter from the researcher and a pre-addressed, stamped, envelope. The solicitation letter from the researcher stated the purpose of the intended Renaissance School study of school choice and outlined limitations and relevant protocols connected to the study. While the solicitation letter also encouraged participation in the Renaissance School study, it stipulated that cooperation was completely voluntary and that participation, and the data collected, would remain anonymous. The subjects were also told that they could withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice. Surveys and Informed Consent Forms sent in the mailing were coded with only the assigned, four digit code designated within the study's data base.

After three weeks, the initially designated response period, eighty surveys or 45 % of the mailing were returned, completed. An additional post card reminder was mailed on January 25, 2000, to those parents who had not responded. By February 10, 2000, fifteen additional surveys were returned and that portion of the data collection concluded. The total return rate of 100 out of the 179 mailed surveys, represented a 56 % response rate from the selected study population. None of the mailed surveys or post cards were returned, marked as undeliverable, so the assumption was made that all of the subjects within the study population had been contacted at least once.

The demographic data collected from the completed surveys was entered anonymously in the study's data base. Using SPSS, and subsequently the associated crosstabulations of the statistical program, necessitated that all the data

entered into the data base be numeric. Consequently, all the qualitative demographic data from the survey that was nominal, along with the ordinal data, had to be coded. Ratio data from the survey, the income levels, while already numeric, was also coded before entry into the data base, primarily for easier manipulation and eventually for analysis.

Data from the survey check list about selection criteria was ordinal, qualitative data, given ordinal quantitative coding and then entered directly into the data base. Data regarding the other selection criteria questions on the survey, specifically responses from questions two, three and four had to be coded; those responses were nominal, qualitative data. After the data was retrieved from the surveys, coded and entered into the data base, the surveys were sealed in an envelope, stored and eventually destroyed.

After receiving authorization on signed Informed Consent Forms, data from archival records, documents from the Renaissance School and the Montclair Public Schools along with Freedom of Choice documents associated with the sample population was collected and likewise entered anonymously into the study's data base. That data included more demographic information, along with additional data about selection criteria. Any of the additional data that was not numeric was coded, using the protocols outlined before. Overall, the data base contained information on twelve identified demographic variables and sixteen identified selection criteria variables.

All consent forms were sealed in an envelope and also stored. Although both the surveys and consent forms were stored, they never were commingled. Specific separation avoided any participant's identity as a signature being associated with data revealed on a completed survey. Three months after the successful oral defense of the Renaissance School study as a dissertation project, the Informed Consent Forms were also destroyed.

Within the study's data base, recent survey information regarding selection criteria, specifically responses to question number three, the most important "single" criteria associated with school choice selection, and the dated information about selection criteria, that had been collected from the Freedom of Choice documents, were categorized as separate variables. That design strategy acknowledged that the survey had asked parents to recall their reasons for the Renaissance School selection, while the Freedom of Choice documents recorded a reason at the time of school choice application. Data from Part II of the School Choice Study Survey, specifically responses to questions number one, two and four, that was each variable from the survey check list section, the responses regarding "other", not mentioned criteria and the responses to the "three best things" about the Renaissance School, also was collected as separate variables in the data base. In asking the parents to list the three best things about Renaissance School, the researcher's intent was to find an indirect source that would yield information about selection criteria used in school choice decisions and provide another criteria variable. "Three best things" could have an association with

parent's exceptions being met, and exceptions might be another way of identifying the selection criteria of school choice.

All the data included in the study's data base was anonymous, individually identified by only the four digit code. The master mailing/phone list, used exclusively for the initial and follow-up mailings, for identifying and afterward contacting focus group participants was subsequently destroyed.

Before convening each of the focus groups, permission to audio tape the sessions was requested from the participants. Additionally, some participants were shown their Informed Consent Forms to verify voluntary participation. For those "recruited" into focus group participation, verbal, voluntary, participation consent was re-established before starting each session. Four parents, three of them non-White and specifically recruited for the focus group session on Tuesday, February 29, 2000, did not attend and since they had given no advanced notification, the researcher was unable to make participant substitutions. Other than that complication, the focus group sessions proceeded much as expected with all attending participants sharing their opinions and insights. Data from the focus group sessions conducted on February 29, 2000, and March 1, 2000, both at 7:00 in the evening, on the first floor, social studies classroom at the Renaissance School, was initially collected on audio tapes. Later the audio tapes were transcribed into two, typed transcripts.

The transcripts provided associated data for the study, inherently narrative in quality. Ultimately, the focus groups provided the opportunity to elaborate on

the qualitative selection criteria data already collected, although this time expressed verbally in a more real world setting. Eight participants on one night and twelve participants the next evening participated in the approximately ninety minute focus group sessions.

Focus groups, as a strategy for data collection, are based on the fact that humans, as social creatures, interact with others (Krueger, 1994). Through that interaction or group dynamic, individual notions or opinions are formed and shaped. The complexity of opinions revealed as groups respond in session reveals reflected, contextualized and refined understandings (Krueger, 1994). Focus groups are a socially oriented research method which captures real-life data in a social environment.

Unlike surveys, focus groups offer the flexibility to probe responses. Unanticipated issues can not be explored within the more structured questioning sequence of typical mailed-out surveys (Krueger, 1994). The context of the focus group, however, allows the moderator multiple opportunities to explore and expand upon unexpected responses.

The data obtained from focus group interaction is unlike the complicated, statistical charts presented in some other studies; it has what is commonly called "high face validity" (Krueger, 1994). Focus groups produce a common language that everyone can understand, a language that is believable, uses lay terminology, embellished with quotes and detectable nuances like body language, gestures or resonating voice inflections.

Despite those advantages, focus groups also have limitations. A researcher using focus groups has less control in the group interview as compared to the individual interview (Krueger, 1994). Participants, interacting with each other, may influence the course of the discussion, resulting in detours or conversations of irrelevant issues. The skilled moderator has a responsibility to keep the discussion focused on the intended purpose of the focus group.

The data obtained from focus groups, while rich in meaning, is more difficult to analyze. Remarks and comments need to be interpreted within the surrounding social context (Krueger, 1994). Responses cannot be lifted from context nor re-sequenced. Sometimes focus group participants, as a result of the group dynamics, will modify or even reverse their positions, and that shift must be interpreted in accurate succession.

Focus groups vary and it takes the skills of a trained moderator to keep a focus group on track. Open-ended questioning, techniques like pauses and probes, transitioning skills which move the discussion along to new questions, all require a degree of expertise not typically possessed by many researchers (Krueger, 1994). The ultimate success or failure of the focus group once formed, hinges predominately on the skills of the selected moderator.

Conducting the focus groups in association with this study provided refined insights about the selection criteria used by the sample, parent population and expanded understandings, either by collaborating or contradicting the data already collected from the surveys and the document sources qualitative responses. The

determination to use the focus groups to collect that additional qualitative data resulted after weighing the innate advantages of focus group techniques with the limitations inherent in focus group designs. The advantages seemed to far outweigh the disadvantages; therefore, the focus group technique was included in this study.

<center>Data presentation.</center>

The sample population for the study was formed by those parents who responded to the survey and the Informed Consent Form mailed to the study population. The sample population provided the solicited survey information and then authorized the use of records pertaining to their children for obtaining other data relevant to the study. Data about twelve identified demographic variables, obtained from multiple sources, along with data about sixteen selection criteria variables, likewise collected from various sources, was assembled in the study's data base. Finally, through the use of focus group interviews, the study collected collateral data relating to the selection criteria used by parents in the sample population. Chapter Four, the data presentation, reported the comprehensive details about that inspection of demographic and selection criteria variables and provided the transcripts from the focus group interviews.

First the data presentation exhibited the findings, summarized as percentage frequencies, reported through tables and augmented with narratives, for each of the demographic variables investigated within the study. Inasmuch as one hundred parents formed the sample population, resulting percentage frequencies reported in

the findings summaries, also represented actual counts. The percentage

frequencies revealed specific characteristics about the sample parent population

who chose the Renaissance School.

Similarly, the data regarding the selection criteria variables, collected

through surveys and documents, was summarized with percentage frequencies and

also reported through tables, extended with narrative transitions. Those specific

frequencies provided insight into the actions of the sample population and about

which criteria were used to make their school choice decision. Not all of the

percentage frequency summaries, either those reflecting demographic or selection

criteria variables, reflected 100 % responses. Individual tables noted where data

was missing; however, any percentage reported missing, as a result of the number

depicting the sample population, also indicated an actual count. Additionally, in

the percentage frequencies given for "other", most important "single" criteria and

responses from the Freedom of Choice documents, three of the selection criteria

variables, only peak, or the most frequently occurring percentages were presented

within the tables. Other responses, were detailed in the accompanying narrative to

that specific table summary.

SPSS crosstabulations then compared some of the individual demographic

variable percentage frequencies, first to each other and then with every selection

criteria variable percentage frequency. The resulting crosstabulation matches were

determined in part by issues identified in the theoretical base, revealed throughout

the literature. The specific manipulation of the data, the crosstabulation, allowed

the researcher to further analyze the data and probe for variations and possible patterns or detectable relationships that might emerge among the sample population who selected the Renaissance School or between the sample population and the selection criteria they used; all crosstabulations providing disaggregated data. Any patterns that emerged from the sample Renaissance data could then be evaluated within the context of the entire Renaissance School population and eventually compared to examples reported from other researched populations.

Chapter Four, the data presentation, displayed only the statistical summaries (percentage frequencies) of those crosstabulations. It was not an interpretive analysis or evaluation about emerging patterns or relationships from the sample Renaissance School data. It did not reveal how the sample compared with the total Renaissance School population, nor connections to data from other researched populations. Analysis and evaluation are presented in Chapter Five. The summaries of the crosstabulations were also presented in tables, developed with narrative transitions which examined the crosstabulation individually, but then compared them to corresponding percentage frequencies from the whole sample population. That particular data presentation strategy allowed the researcher not only the opportunity to inspect and then report about the percentage frequencies of specifically matched demographic and criteria variables, but simultaneously to examine and then relate how the matched variables compared to a corresponding set of percentage frequencies for the sample population overall, in effect noting

variation. Any matches not made as a result of missing data were noted within individual tables.

Additionally, some of the crosstabulation summaries that matched demographic variables with the selection criteria variables which were investigated with open-ended questions, even though the selection criteria responses had been coded, eventuated in such an array of frequencies that only those with the highest frequencies or peaks, were presented in the findings of Chapter Four. Specifically that occurred in the matching demographic variables with "other", most important "single" criteria and responses from the Freedom of Choice documents, three of the selection criteria variables for the sample population where only peak or highest frequency percentages were presented originally. Accordingly, none of those tables represented 100 % of the crosstabulation matches and no percentage frequencies were given, only a listing of the most frequent responses.

The open-ended nature of those selection criteria questions, "other", most important "single" criteria and responses from the Freedom of Choice documents, allowed parents to come up with their own criteria rationale instead of having to reconcile their responses to fit the already articulated criteria similar to those presented in the survey check list. That open-endedness revealed enormous and rich variety, but at the same time, diminished the effectiveness of the sampling. The responses were spread among such an extensive array of criteria that it was difficult to determine variations or detect peak percentage frequencies.

Finally, Chapter Four presented the entire transcript from both of the focus group sessions, supplying information obtained from the selected sub-sample population regarding selection criteria. Within the text of the focus group transcripts, comments were labeled only "moderator" or "female or male respondent" since it was not significant to associate specific comments with specific, individual participants. The purpose of the focus groups was exclusively the clarification and expansion of information already collected about selection criteria, not an attempt to connect any demographic information with individually utilized selection criteria. The transcripts were preceded by demographic summary data depicting the known characteristics of the focus group participants.

Data Analysis and Evaluation

Case study, the selected methodology for this study, ultimately determined the form of the analysis and evaluation by accentuating context, both quantitative and qualitative evidence and prior theoretical assumptions. As in typical qualitative design, the analysis and evaluation for the study also focused on observed or detected themes for insight, explanation or meaning (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996). Similarly, the absence of predictable themes or unanticipated themes, affected analysis and evaluation, essentially asking what the study failed to reveal or revealed instead.

Most of the qualitative and quantitative data obtained through the study, specifically data relating to the twelve demographic variables and the sixteen selection criteria variables investigated, was assigned numeric indices, statistically

summarized and reported with percentage frequencies presenting descriptive data. Crosstabulations of that descriptive data looked for variations and patterns or relationships between variables. The data collected from the focus group interviews remained narrative and was used primarily to collaborate or contradict the findings represented by the descriptive data, adding refinement and clarification to that data.

The researcher, inspecting the data from the focus groups sessions, looked for major themes or the big ideas emerging from the participants' dialogue. The words, within the context of discussion, were examined for frequency, extensiveness and intensity along with internal consistency. Any inconsistent comments or possible alternative explanations were evaluated and noted within the data analysis.

The data assembled and presented in Chapter Four is analyzed and evaluated in Chapter Five in an attempt to reconstruct the reality of the responses of the study's participants from the data provided by the research results within the framework of case study methodology. Chapter Five presented the data analysis and evaluation, inspecting each of the research questions using the findings assembled by the study, the context of the study and other researched populations to support that interpretation. The analysis and evaluation for the study was connected through descriptive narrative, substantiated with statistical evidence and representative excerpts from subjects of the sample population. Others, specifically members of the dissertation committee and Dr. Anand, reviewed the

study's findings prior to analysis and evaluation. That review resulted in acquiring other interpretations and obtaining all possible meaning from the findings. It was also a deliberate attempt not to draw over-generalizations from that data.

First, Chapter Five analyzed specific data regarding the demographic and selection criteria variables investigated at the Renaissance School. A comprehensive portrait emerged from the sample population data about who chose the Renaissance School and the selection criteria they used. Summarized, that data was interpreted within the context of the entire Renaissance School population and then evaluated next to other researched school choice populations.

Results from the crosstabulations uncovered variations and relationships or patterns manifested within the sample population itself and then between the sample population and the criteria they used. Evaluation further compared and contrasted any emerging patterns from those crosstabulations within the context of the Renaissance School and then to other populations. That specific inspection allowed the researcher not only to comment on any detectable variation and patterns or relationships between the selecting population and the criteria they used, but to evaluate whether the choosing population at the Renaissance School was typical or distinct when viewed against other choosing population. Finally, by analyzing and evaluating the data, the researcher endeavored to determine whether school choice as implemented and observed at the Renaissance School supported or refuted representative conjectures about school choice extended in research

literature. Were the reported benefits or obstacles resulting from extended school choice policies evident in this examined sample population?

<div align="center">Chapter Summary</div>

Chapter Three first detailed the necessity for research design and methodology within the research framework. It also inspected the comprehensive research design and methodology issues connected to the current investigation, a case study. The collective sources of evidence for this study--the survey, school and district documents, and the focus group interviews--were described. Strategies for study population identification and selection, the formation of the sample population and focus group selection were detailed. The data collection strategies along with the plan for data presentation were summarized. Finally, the strategies and standards utilized in the data analysis and evaluation for this study-- inspecting how the data elicited associated with questions connected to this study-- was interpreted and completed this chapter.

Three crucial and over-all considerations of research design and methodology guided this descriptive case study. The need for establishing a strong chain of evidence within the study was paramount (Leddy, 1997). Validity for this research was strengthened by linking questions to methodology and design, then to raw data, and finally to the interpretations of the study.

Additionally, triangulation was a qualitative strategy used in this research. Multiple data collection methods, supported by multiple sources of evidence, analysis and theories, all addressed the eventual validity issues of the study's

findings. If similar themes appeared in the assorted data collected from a variety of sources, the ultimate credibility of the resulting interpretations was enhanced.

Finally, another strategy of qualitative research, pattern matching, was used in this study to explore the effects of the investigated phenomena, school choice. If the observed behaviors or collected data matched the theoretical assumptions or expected outcomes associated with school choice, the validity of the study was increased. Likewise, if the uncovered data instead supported rival theories about school choice, the validity of the findings of the study was also enhanced.

CHAPTER IV

Presentation of Data

The purpose of this study was to identify and analyze the criteria employed by an identified suburban/urban population as they exercised extended options afforded through school choice toward admission of their child to a public middle school. To answer the research questions posed in this study, a study population of one hundred seventy-nine parents was identified from the Renaissance Middle School in Montclair, New Jersey. A School Choice Study Survey was mailed to each of the subjects in the study population. They were asked to complete the survey, giving information about demographic and selection criteria variables associated with the study.

Additionally, the study population was asked to give permission to the researcher to use data from archival records and other documents from the Renaissance School and the Montclair Public Schools pertaining to their child. Collateral records and documents supplied additional demographic and selection criteria information. Members of the study population who completed the survey and authorized the use of collateral documents formed the sample population. They provided demographic and selection criteria information; who chose the Renaissance School and what criteria were used to make that school choice decision?

Between January 6, 2000 and February 10, 2000, one hundred parents, 56 % of the study population, completed and returned the surveys, and gave authorization to use the requested documents pertaining to their child; thereby forming the sample population. Additionally, forty-five parents, 25 % of the study population, volunteered or ultimately consented to participate in focus groups interviews. Focus group interviews were a planned design of data collection for this study, primarily included to collect collateral qualitative data regarding selection criteria used in school choice. Twenty-four parents were selected from the focus group volunteers and assigned to one of the two focus group sessions. Those sessions, one on February 29, 2000, and one on March 1, 2000, probed the specifics of school choice selection criteria. Eight parents participated on February 29, 2000, and twelve parents participated on March 1, 2000. Four selected parents failed to attend the session on February 29, 2000.

The qualitative and quantitative demographic and selection criteria data collected from the completed surveys and the collateral records was entered into a study data base. SPSS statistically summarized that data, presenting percentage frequencies for twelve demographic variables and sixteen selection criteria variables. SPSS crosstabulations matched some demographic variables, first to each other and then to the selection criteria variables to look for variations and patterns or relationships within the data collected; were there specific associations evident within the sample choosing population or the sample choosing population and the criteria they used to select the Renaissance School?

Chapter Four, the data presentation, first reported the summarized

percentage frequencies for all the demographic and selection criteria variables

compiled in the study's data base. It also presented the results of the

crosstabulations for some of those variables. The second section of Chapter Four

submitted the entire transcript from both focus group sessions. All the data

obtained presented comprehensive details associated with the sample population

and directly addressed three of the study's research questions.

The data collected in the study's data base, summarized and then

manipulated through SPSS crosstabulations all resulted in percentage frequencies.

That was descriptive data and by its nature exhibited specific characteristics.

Descriptive data, presented as percentage frequencies, was used to summarize and

organize the qualitative and quantitative evidence collected in the study. As in

typical case study, a qualitative methodology, the reported percentage frequencies,

or their summaries as descriptive data, could be used to detect themes, but unlike

inferential data, could not be used to make predictions to other populations based

on the outcomes of this data. Any generalizations resulting from this case study

had to be formed by also including the context of the study and prior theoretical

assumptions; descriptive data would not permit such inference based on study data

alone.

Additionally, since one hundred parents formed the sample population, any

percentage frequencies reported about that sample population in the presentation

of data also represented actual counts. Any percentages or number counts

reported about the study population, numbering one hundred seventy-nine, or the Renaissance School population, numbering two hundred twenty-three, differed individually and percentages were not the same as actual counts.

<div align="center">Demographic Variables</div>

This section of the data presentation summarized the qualitative and quantitative demographic data gathered from the survey instrument, archival records and documents from the Renaissance School and the Montclair Public Schools. The data gave illustrative information about the sample population; who chose the Renaissance School? The data was descriptive and summarized from the study data base as percentage frequencies, presented in tables. Any data that was not numeric was coded before it was entered into the data base.

The data presented in this section evaluated twelve different demographic variables, all dependent. Specifically those demographic variables were: student gender and race, feeder elementary school, income levels and educational attainment levels for the household, 504, Special Education and STAR designations, fifth grade Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT) scores in reading, math and language and free lunch designations. The data was presented to describe the sample population and eventually would be used in the data analysis and evaluation of this study to depict the sample population and then to determine if any of the demographic characteristics reported about that sample population related to their school choice selection criteria.

Table 16

Gender Frequencies for the Sample Population

Gender	Percent
Male Student	52
Female Student	48

Table 16 gave gender information about the sample population, actually their child's gender, included as embedded units. Gender representations for the total Renaissance School population, however, were 45 % female, n = 102, and 56 % male, n = 122 male.

Table 17

<u>Racial Frequencies for the Sample Population</u>

<u>Race</u>	<u>Percent</u>
White	74
Afro-American	14
Hispanic	4
Biracial	8

Table 17 gave racial information about the sample population, again

actually their child's race; likewise embedded units. The racial make-up at the

Renaissance School was 48 % minority and 52 % White (Memo, March 9, 1999).

None of the parents responding to the survey designated Asian as the race of their

child. While a racial category identified as "other" was listed in the survey, no

parents check that category, indicating instead that their child was Biracial; thus

the new category was assigned for reporting results about the sample population.

For purposes of data analysis, racial frequencies for the sample population

hereafter, will be treated as grouped data; 74 % White and 26 % non-White. The

non-White group for this study included the Afro-American, Hispanic and Biracial

sub-populations.

Table 18

<u>Feeder School Frequencies for the Sample Population</u>[a]

Feeder Schools	Percent
Watchung	18
Hillside	26
Edgemont	19
Bradford	5
Northeast	5
Rand	22

<u>Note.</u> [a]Five parents, 5 %, reported no feeder school

Table 18 gave information regarding the feeder schools associated with the sample population, again actually the child's feeder school, included as embedded units. Five parents responding to the survey did not list a feeder school for their child. Each of the feeder elementary schools in Montclair offered a distinct magnet theme. Also note that Nishuane, the seventh elementary school in the Montclair Public Schools, enrolled only students in kindergarten through Grade 2 and was not a direct feeder for any middle school in Montclair. Indirectly, Nishuane, designated as a gifted and talented magnet, fed into Hillside, the gifted and talented magnet for grades three through five.

Table 19

Income Frequencies for the Sample Population[a]

Income Level	Percent
$25,000-49,999	5
$50,000-74,999	12
$75,000-99,999	17
Over $100,000	65

Note. [a]One parent, 1 %, reported no income level

Table 19 revealed income levels for the sample population. No incomes of $25,000 or less were reported by the sample population. One subject in the sample population, 1 %, did not list an income level. Median income for Essex county was $34,050-$38,668 (Funderburg, 1999). Median income for Montclair was reported at $65,882, while the state median income for New Jersey was reported at $58,448 (Funderburg, 1999). Montclair had 2,200 people living below the poverty level (Funderburg, 1999), and provided subsidized housing units to those that qualified. Seventeen percent of the Montclair Public School's student population was eligible for free lunch and another 2 % in the district was eligible for reduced price lunch. The Renaissance School had seventeen students, 8 % of the school population, eligible for free lunch. One percent of the sample population, $n = 1$, had free lunch designation.

Hereafter, for purposes of data analysis, the income frequencies would be reported as grouped data. Three categories would depict that grouped data; upper, middle and low income class. Upper class meant family income of $100,000 or more. Middle class meant incomes from $50,00 to $99,999 and low class meant incomes below $50,000.

Table 20

Education Level Frequencies for the Sample Population

Education Level	Percent
Technical School or Some College	6
College Graduate	24
Graduate Degree	70

Table 20 gave information regarding the educational level attained by the sample, parent population. No subjects in the sample population indicated lower than technical school or some college level for educational attainment; the preponderance of the parents listed graduate degrees as the highest level of attainment.

Table 21

Special Needs Frequencies for the Sample Population

Needs Designation		Percent
504		3
Special Education		8
STARS		4
	Total	15

The special needs population at the Renaissance School was comprised of students receiving some type of adaptation to and/or support in their ongoing instructional program and were reported in Table 21. Twelve students at the Renaissance School had 504s, 5 % of the school population; twenty-one students were classified Special Education, 9 % of the school population; and 6 % of the school population or fourteen students were assigned to STARS. Twenty-one percent of the students at the Renaissance School had special needs. The sample population included 15 % or 15 students with special needs designation. Special Education, 504 and STAR designations were presented as grouped data, namely special needs, in the analysis and evaluation for this study.

Table 22

MAT Frequencies by Stanine Category for the Sample Population-Grade 5 Scores[a]

MAT SCORE		Percent
Reading	Below Average Stanines 1,2,3	0
	Average Stanines 4,5,6	22
	Above Average Stanines 7,8,9	70
Math	Below Average Stanines 1,2,3	2
	Average Stanines 4,5,6	23
	Above Average Stanines 7,8,9	67
Language	Below Average Stanines 1,2,3	2
	Average Stanines 4,5,6	23
	Above Average Stanines 7,8,9	67

Note. [a]No MAT scores available for Special Education students, 8 % of sample population

Table 22 reported the fifth grade MAT (Metropolitan Achievement Test) scores for the sample population, actually their children's scores as embedded

units. Only grouped stanine scores were reported. No MAT scores were available for the Special Education students; 8 % of the sample population.

This concluded the section in the data presentation summarizing demographic variables. More parents of boys responded than parents of girls, reflecting somewhat the gender make-up of the Renaissance School population. A disproportionate number of Whites, when compared to non-Whites, participated in the study by responding to the survey and signing the Informed Consent Form. More students came from Hillside than any other feeder, however Hillside had by far, the largest elementary school population to transfer. Sixty-five percent of the sample population reported incomes over $100,000, 70 % of the sample population had graduate degrees. Eight percent of the sample population had special needs, 1 % was eligible for free lunch. Seventy percent of the sample population had MAT scores in the above average stanine category for reading, 67 % had scores in the above average stanine category for math, and 67 % had scores in the above average stanine category in language. Two percent of the sample population had scores in the below average stanine in math, 2 % had scores in the below average stanine in language. No below average reading stanines were reported.

<div align="center">Selection Criteria Variables</div>

This section of the data presentation summarized qualitative data gathered from the survey instrument and Renaissance School documents inspecting the selection criteria used in school choice decisions by the sample population; what

criteria were used to make the Renaissance School selection? The data was descriptive, summarized from the study data base and presented as percentage frequencies in individual tables. All the data was qualitative and had to be coded before entering it into the data base.

Most of the data pertaining to the selection criteria variables was provided by the one hundred subjects in the sample population as they returned completed surveys. Additional data pertaining to a singular selection criteria variable was collected from the Freedom of Choice documents, filed by those same one hundred individuals when they selected sixth grade Renaissance School admission. In signing their Informed Consent Form, the sample population authorized the use of their Freedom of Choice document to collect that data.

The data presented in this section evaluated sixteen different selection criteria variables, all dependent. Specifically those selection criteria variables were: each of the twelve selection criteria listed on survey check list, then ranked by the responding sample population, the responses to question number two on the survey, listing "other" selection criteria used, the responses to question number three on the survey, listing the most important "single" selection criteria used in choosing, the responses to question number four on the survey, listing "three best things" about the Renaissance School and the declaration about selection criteria from the Freedom of Choice document. The data was presented to identify the school choice selection criteria used by the sample population and eventually would be used in the data analysis and evaluation of this study. The selection

criteria data was matched with the data regarding demographic variables using

crosstabulations to determine if variations and patterns or relationships manifested

between the sample population and the selection criteria they used in school choice

decisions.

Table 23

Selection Criteria Frequencies from Survey Check List for Sample Population[a]

Selection Criteria	Percent			
	Not Important	Important	Very Important	No Response Given
Magnet Theme	15	48	36	1
Perceived Quality	2	12	86	0
Reputation on the Street	30	46	23	1
Reputation of Staff	5	29	66	0
School Location	59	32	7	2
School Atmosphere	12	53	34	1
School Size	2	31	67	0
Instructional Approach	4	33	61	2
Friends at School	61	35	4	0
Siblings at School	61	28	5	6
School Reflects Family Values	12	51	34	3
Opportunities for Parent Involvement	21	53	24	2

Note. [a]Eighteen responses not given, individually indicated by selection criteria variable

Table 23 recorded percentage frequencies from the responses to question number one on the survey, the checklist. The responses were coded with the assigned values of 1, 2 and 3. Three meant very important, two meant important and one was not important. Perceived quality of the school, school size,

reputation of the staff, and instructional approach, in that order, were criteria checked most frequently as very important. Friends or siblings already at the school, and school location were most often ranked not important. "Important" criteria were opportunities for parent involvement, school atmosphere, and school reflects family values.

Table 24

Mean Scores - Selection Criteria from Survey Check List for Sample Population

Selection Criteria	Mean	Population Number
Magnet Theme	2.21	99
Perceived Quality	2.84	100
Reputation on the Street	1.93	99
Reputation of Staff	2.61	100
School Location	1.47	98
School Atmosphere	2.22	99
School Size	2.65	100
Instructional Approach	2.58	98
Friends at School	1.43	100
Siblings at School	1.40	94
School Reflects Family Values	2.23	97
Opportunity for Parent Involvement	2.03	98

Note. Maximum possible mean score = 3.00, minimum = 1.00

By coding the responses given on the survey checklist question with the assigned values of 1, 2 and 3, mean scores resulted which were reported in Table 24.

Question number two on the survey asked parents to list any additional selection criteria, they felt important in school choice decisions; criteria that had not been included on the check list. Many parents responded with some of the same twelve selection criteria variables from the check list, however. Those responses were thrown out. Some parents did offer additional selection criteria when they responded to this survey question. Table 25 recorded the peak, percentage frequencies or those that were mentioned more often in response to question number two on the survey. All the data collected from question number two on the survey was qualitative data and had to be coded before entering it into the data base.

Table 25

"Other" Selection Criteria for Sample Population-Peak Percentage Frequencies Only[a]

"Other" Selection Criteria	Percent
Leadership of School	9
Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	7
Length of School Day	6
Kid's Choice of Schools	4

Note. [a]Percentage frequencies reported above were those mentioned most often and represented only partial data, not 100 % of the responses about the variable inspected

While Table 25 revealed the most mentioned "other" reasons for school choice, it was important to the full understanding of school choice, to report the additional selection criteria that were mentioned by the sample, parent population which did not display large percentage frequencies. The variety of responses gave some indication of the number of different selection criteria used by this sample population in school choice selection, and they revealed certain particularities about the sample Renaissance School population not evident in other researched populations. Other selection criteria mentioned with far smaller percentage frequencies included: risk-takers for a new and exciting program, school information availability, valued the diversity of the curriculum offered and the population assembled, prior negative experiences, use of lap tops, (e-mates), or other technology, and fits kid's needs.

When asked, on question number three of the survey, to list the most important "single" selection criteria that determined school choice for them, the data summarized in Table 26 was recorded by the sample population; again representing coded data displaying peak, percentage frequencies. Sixteen percent, the remaining responses to this question not summarized in the table, displayed much smaller percentage frequencies and were spread among eight selection criteria. The selection criteria not included in the table representation included: magnet theme of the school, atmosphere of the school, school reflects family values, risk-takers for a new and exciting program, valued the diversity of the curriculum offered and the population assembled, use of lap tops, (e-mates), or

other technology, safety of the school and school presented a creative and

innovative program. Table 26 reported the peak percentage frequencies for survey

question number three.

Table 26

Most Important "Single" Selection Criteria Listed on Survey for Sample

Population-Peak Percentage Frequencies Only[a]

"Single" Selection Criteria	Percent
School Size	24
Perceived Quality	16
Instructional Approach	14
Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	12
Reputation of Staff	11
Leadership of School	7

[a]Percentage frequencies reported above were those mentioned most often

and represented only partial data, not 100 % of the responses about the variable

inspected

Question number four on the survey asked parents to list the "three best things" about the school they selected, Renaissance School. The responses collected were coded, entered into the data base and were displayed in Table 27.

Table 27

"Three Best Things" about Renaissance School for Sample Population-Peak Percentage Frequencies Only[a]

"Three Best Things"	Percent
School Size	70
Reputation of Staff	63
Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	42
Instructional Approach	24
School Atmosphere	15
Magnet Theme	14
Leadership of School	13

Note. [a]Percentage frequencies reported above were those mentioned most often and represented only partial data, not 100 % of the responses about the variable inspected

The data reported in Table 27 was included anticipating its use in the data analysis and evaluation for this study. In data analysis for this study, "three best

things" related to expectations being met, and expectations could be an elaboration on selection criteria. The use of "three best things" in the crosstabulations with demographic variables also revealed different patterns for choosing within various sub-populations. Table 27 presented data on the responses displaying the highest percentage frequencies.

Table 28

Selection Criteria Listed on Freedom of Choice Document for Sample Population-

Peak Percentage Frequencies Only[a]

Criteria	Percent
School Size	28
Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	14
Fits Kid's Needs	11
Magnet Theme	7
Risk-Takers for a New and Exciting Program	7
Instructional Approach	6
Siblings at School	7

Note. [a]Percentage frequencies reported above were those mentioned most often

and represented only partial data, not 100 % of the responses about the variable

inspected.

Freedom of Choice documents for all one hundred subjects in the sample

population were inspected. Recorded selection criteria was coded and entered into

the data base. Fourteen subjects listed no selection criteria on their Freedom of

Choice document. Only those selection criteria displaying peak, percentage

frequencies were displayed in Table 28. Some of the responses, specifically those

from the current eighth grade parents, were three years old, and all the selection

criteria listed on the Freedom of Choice documents may have been authored with

somewhat a singular motivation; getting admitted to the Renaissance School.

This concluded the section in the data presentation relating to selection

criteria variables. It was useful to look at what could be called selection criteria

profiles, for a summary of the selection criteria data presented in this section.

Those profiles, Table 29, would also be useful in up-coming data presentation

sections when the results of crosstabulations were compared to the results of the

sample population in an attempt to uncover variation and possible patterns or

relationships.

Table 29

<u>Selection Criteria Profiles for the Sample Population-Summary</u>

<u>Selection Criteria From Survey Check List</u>	<u>"Other" Selection Criteria</u>
Perceived Quality	Leadership of School
School Size	Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum
Reputation of Staff	Length of School Day
Instructional Approach	Kid's Choice of Schools

<u>Most Important "Single" Selection Criteria</u>	<u>"Three Best Things"</u>	<u>Selection Criteria Listed on Freedom of Choice Document</u>
Size of School	Size of School	Size of School
Perceived Quality	Reputation of Staff	Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum
Instructional Approach	Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	Fits Kid's Needs
Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	Instructional Approach	Magnet Theme
Reputation of Staff	School Atmosphere	Risk-Takers for a New and Exciting Program
Leadership of School	Magnet Theme	Instructional Approach
	Leadership of School	Siblings at School

<center>Crosstabulations</center>

The next section of the data presentation exhibited the crosstabulations

done on SPSS. First, some demographic variables were matched with each other

to uncover possible variations and patterns or relationships in the sample

population itself. Then, crosstabulations were presented for five of the

demographic variables, matched individually, with the selection criteria variables.

Again, the purpose for these crosstabulations was to look for variations and

patterns or relationships among the demographic variables and the demographic

variables and the selection criteria variables for the sample population.

Crosstabulation results were presented in table summaries with narrative additions

that depicted how the specific crosstabulations compared to the percentage

frequencies reported earlier in this chapter about the sample population. In SPSS,

when data was missing from either of the matched variables, no frequency was

generated. Those not matched in the up-coming data were noted on the individual

tables reporting that crosstabulation. Tables reported percentage frequencies

which were also actual counts.

<u>Crosstabulations -- Demographic Variables</u>

Tables 30 - 33 in this section matched gender to the other demographic

variables.

Table 30

Crosstabs: Gender/Race by Percentage Frequencies for the Sample Population

	White %	Non-White %
Male Student	39	13
Female Student	35	13

Table 31

Crosstabs: Gender/Feeder by Percentage Frequencies for the Sample Population[a]

	Watchung %	Hillside %	Edgemont %	Bradford %	Northeast %	Rand %
Male Student	10	17	9	2	2	10
Female Student	8	9	10	3	3	12

Note. [a]5 % not matched

Table 31 showed proportionally more boys in the sample population coming from Hillside. More girls than boys came from Edgemont, Bradford, Northeast and Rand.

Table 32

Crosstabs: Gender/Income Levels by Percentage Frequencies for the Sample

Population[a]

	Low %	Middle %	Upper %
Male Student	2	12	38
Female Student	3	17	27

Note. [a]1% not matched

Table 33

Crosstabs: Gender/Education Levels by Percentage Frequencies for the Sample

Population

	Technical School or Some College %	College Graduate %	Graduate Degree %
Male Student	3	10	39
Female Student	3	14	31

Tables 34 - 36 matched race to the other demographic variables.

Table 34

Crosstabs: Race/Feeder by Percentage Frequencies for the Sample Population[a]

	Watchung %	Hillside %	Edgemont %	Bradford %	Northeast %	Rand %
White	12	20	16	3	3	18
Non-White	6	6	3	2	2	4

Note. [a]5 % not matched

Table 34 showed proportionally fewer non-White students coming from Hillside, Edgemont and Rand within the sample population.

Table 35

Crosstabs: Race/Income Level by Percentage Frequencies for the Sample Population[a]

	Low %	Middle %	Upper %
White	2	18	53
Non-White	3	11	12

Note. [a]1 % not matched

Data presented in Table 35 showed an income gap between White and non-White within the sample population.

Table 36

Crosstabs: Race/Education Level by Percentage Frequencies for the Sample

Population

	Technical School or Some College	College Graduate	Graduate Degree
	%	%	%
White	1	19	54
Non-White	5	5	16

Table 36 showed gap in the educational levels between the White and non-White sample population. Both Table 35 and Table 36 gave some indication of a non-White, professional population within the sample population.

Tables 37 - 38 matched feeder school with the other demographic variables.

Table 37

Crosstabs: Feeder/Income Level by Percentage Frequencies for the Sample

Population[a]

	Watchung %	Hillside %	Edgemont %	Bradford %	Northeast %	Rand %
Low	0	1	2	0	1	0
Middle	6	8	6	1	0	4
Upper	12	17	11	4	3	18

Note. [a]6 % not matched

Table 38

Crosstabs: Feeder/Education Level by Percentage Frequencies for the Sample

Population[a]

	Watchung %	Hillside %	Edgemont %	Bradford %	Northeast %	Rand %
Technical or Some College	0	1	1	0	1	0
College Graduate	4	3	7	2	1	5
Graduate Degree	14	22	11	3	3	17

Note. [a]5 % not matched

Table 39 matched income levels to educational levels for the sample population.

Table 39

Crosstabs: Income Level/Education Level by Percentage Frequencies for the Sample Population[a]

	Technical School or Some College %	College Graduate %	Graduate Degree %
Low	2	3	0
Middle	3	10	16
Upper	1	11	53

Note. [a]1 % not matched

Tables 30 - 39 presented summarized crosstabulations for matched demographic variables. More girls proportionally came from Edgemont, Bradford, Northeast and Rand; more boys came from Hillside. Fewer non-White students proportionally came from Hillside, Edgemont or Rand. There was variation in the income and educational levels for the parents of boys compared to the parents of girls. An income and educational gap between White and non-White populations was detected, but there was also demonstration of a non-White professional population within the sample population.

Crosstabulations -- Demographic Variables Matched to Section Criteria Variables
from Survey Check List

The next section of the data presentation exhibited crosstabulations for five
of the demographic variables matched to each of the twelve selection criteria from
the survey check list. Comments focused on variations noted for the individual
crosstabulations compared to the percentage frequencies reported earlier in the
chapter for the entire sample population. Again, any crosstabulations not
completed as a result of missing data, were noted on the specific reporting table
for that crosstabulation. Tables reported percentage frequencies which were also
actual counts.

Gender.

Table 40

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Magnet Theme/Gender[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Male Student	10	25	16
Female Student	5	23	20

Note. [a]1 % not matched

Data from Table 40 conformed to the responses from the sample population who also judged the variable important.

Table 41

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Perceived Quality/Gender

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Male Student	1	6	45
Female Student	1	6	41

Data from Table 41 conformed to the responses from the sample population who also judged the variable very important.

Table 42

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Reputation on the Street/Gender[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Male Student	14	23	14
Female Student	16	23	9

Note. [a]1 % not matched

Data from Table 42 conformed to the responses from the sample

population who also judged the variable important.

Table 43

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Reputation of Staff/Gender

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Male Student	3	14	35
Female Student	2	15	31

Data from Table 43 conformed to the responses from the sample

population who also judged the variable very important.

Table 44

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - School Location/Gender[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Male Student	29	20	3
Female Student	30	12	4

Note. [a]2 % not matched

The data from Table 44 conformed to the responses from the sample population who also judged the variable not important.

Table 45

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - School Atmosphere/Gender[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Male Student	6	28	17
Female Student	6	25	17

Note. [a]1 % not matched

The data from Table 45 conformed to the responses from the sample population who also judged the variable important.

Table 46

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - School Size/Gender

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Male Student	1	13	38
Female Student	1	18	29

The data from Table 46 conformed to the responses from the sample population who also judged the variable very important.

Table 47

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Instructional Approach/Gender[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Male Student	3	16	31
Female Student	1	17	30

Note. [a]2 % not matched

The data from Table 47 conformed to the responses from the sample population who also judged the variable very important.

Table 48

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Friends at School/Gender

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Male Student	38	13	1
Female Student	23	22	3

The data from Table 48 conformed to the responses from the sample population who also judged the variable not important.

Table 49

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Siblings at School/Gender[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Male Student	37	12	0
Female Student	24	16	5

Note. [a]6 % not matched

The data from Table 49 conformed to the responses from the sample population who also judged the variable not important.

Table 50

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Reflects Family Values/Gender[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Male Student	10	23	18
Female Student	2	28	16

Note. [a]3 % not matched

The data from Table 50 conformed to the responses from the sample

population who also judged the variable important.

Table 51

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Opportunity for Parent

Involvement/Gender[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Male Student	14	28	8
Female Student	7	25	16

Note. [a]2 % not matched

Data from Table 51 conformed to the responses from the sample

population who also judged the variable important.

None of the crosstabulations between gender and the twelve selection

criteria from the survey check list varied from the sample population.

Race.

Table 52

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Magnet Theme/Race[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
White	13	35	25
Non-White	2	13	11

Note. [a]1 % not matched

Data from Table 52 conformed to responses from the sample population

who also judged the variable important.

Table 53

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Perceived Quality/Race

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
White	0	7	67
Non-White	2	5	19

Data from Table 53 conformed to the responses of the sample population

who also judged the variable very important.

Table 54

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Reputation on the Street/Race[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
White	25	33	15
Non-White	5	13	8

Note. [a]1 % not matched

The data represented in Table 54 conformed to the responses from the

sample population who also judged the variable important.

Table 55

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Reputation of Staff/Race

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
White	5	20	49
Non-White	0	9	17

Data from Table 55 conformed to the responses from the sample

population who also judged the variable very important.

Table 56

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - School Location/Race[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
White	43	25	4
Non-White	16	7	3

Note. [a]2 % not matched

The data from Table 56 conformed to the responses from the sample

population who also judged the variable not important.

Table 57

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - School Atmosphere/Race[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
White	12	38	23
Non-White	0	15	11

Note. [a]1 % not matched

The data in Table 57 conformed to the responses from the sample

population who also judged the variable important.

Table 58

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - School Size/Race

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
White	1	25	48
Non-White	1	6	19

The data in Table 58 conformed to the responses from the sample population who also judged the variable very important.

Table 59

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Instructional Approach/Race[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
White	3	25	45
Non-White	1	8	16

Note. [a]2 % not matched

The data in Table 59 conformed to the responses from the sample population who also judged the variable very important.

Table 60

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Friends at School/Race

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
White	49	23	2
Non-White	12	12	2

Most of the data in Table 60 conformed to the responses from the sample population who also judged the variable not important. However, a tie was noted in the non-White population, who equally judged the variable important.

Table 61

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Siblings at School/Race[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
White	44	24	2
Non-White	17	4	3

Note. [a]6 % not matched

The data in Table 61 conformed to the responses from the sample population who also judged the variable not important.

Table 62

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Reflects Family Values/Race[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
White	11	38	22
Non-White	1	13	12

Note. [a]3 % not matched

The data in Table 62 conformed to the responses from the sample

population who also judged the variable important.

Table 63

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Opportunity for Parent

Involvement/Race[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
White	17	42	14
Non-White	4	11	10

Note. [a]2 % not matched

The data in Table 63 conformed to the responses from the sample

population who also judged the variable important.

Only one of the crosstabulations between race and twelve selection criteria

from the survey check list varied from the sample population. While 12 % of the

non-White sample population judged the variable "friends at school" not important, conforming to the sample population, 12 % of the non-White respondents also judged the variable important.

Feeder.

The next set of crosstabulations matched feeder school with the selection criteria from the survey check list. There was variation exhibited in the responses of parents from different feeder schools, leading to the question of whether or not certain parents chose a particular feeder because of characteristics they already had, or did the characteristics develop as a result of the culture shared by the sub-population during their elementary school years? Also note that the sub-populations from two of the feeder schools, Northeast, Bradford, were very small; Northeast was 5 % of the sample population, $n = 5$, and Bradford was 5 % of the sample population, $n = 5$ Variations exhibited by those two feeders, may have been more a function of the small sub-population size than actual difference. Crosstabulation not completed as a result of missing data were related on specific reporting tables. Tables exhibited percentage frequencies which were also representative of real counts.

Table 64

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Magnet Theme/Feeder[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Watchung	5	8	5
Hillside	6	13	7
Edgemont	1	6	11
Bradford	1	4	0
Northeast	1	1	3
Rand	1	13	8

Note. [a] 6 % not matched

Data in Table 64 mostly conformed to the responses from the sample

population for the most part. While the sample judged the variable important,

parents from Edgemont and Northeast judged the variable very important.

Table 65

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Perceived Quality/Feeder[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Watchung	1	1	16
Hillside	0	3	23
Edgemont	0	3	16
Bradford	1	0	4
Northeast	0	0	5
Rand	0	1	21

Note. [a]5 % not matched

The data in Table 65 conformed to the responses from the sample

population who judged the variable very important.

Table 66

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Reputation on the Street/Feeder[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Watchung	6	11	1
Hillside	9	10	7
Edgemont	4	7	7
Bradford	3	2	0
Northeast	0	1	4
Rand	8	11	3

Note. [a]6 % not matched

The data in Table 66 exhibited variations. The sample population judged the variable important, as did parents from Rand, Watchung, Hillside and Edgemont. An equal number of the parents from Edgemont judged the variable very important, along with those who had judged the variable only important. Parents from Bradford judged the variable not important and parents from Northeast judged the variable very important.

Table 67

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Reputation of Staff/Feeder[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Watchung	1	5	12
Hillside	0	6	20
Edgemont	2	7	10
Bradford	1	0	4
Northeast	0	0	5
Rand	1	9	12

Note. [a]5 % not matched

Data in Table 67 conformed to the responses from the sample population who also judged the variable very important.

Table 68

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - School Location/Feeder[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Watchung	11	6	1
Hillside	15	9	2
Edgemont	12	4	2
Bradford	4	0	1
Northeast	0	4	0
Rand	17	5	0

Note. [a]7 % not matched

Data from Table 68 mostly conformed to the responses from the sample population who also judged the variable not important. Parents from Northeast, however, judged the variable important.

Table 69

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - School Atmosphere/Feeder[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Watchung	2	11	5
Hillside	3	13	9
Edgemont	1	10	8
Bradford	1	2	2
Northeast	1	3	1
Rand	4	9	9

Note. [a]6 % not matched

Data from Table 69 showed some variation. The sample population judged

the variable important, as did the parents from four of the feeder schools.

However, parents from Northeast and Rand judged the variable very important.

Table 70

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - School Size/Feeder[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Watchung	1	4	13
Hillside	1	8	17
Edgemont	0	5	14
Bradford	0	2	3
Northeast	0	1	4
Rand	0	10	12

Note. [a]5 % not matched

The data in Table 70 conformed to the responses from the sample

population who also judged the variable very important.

Table 71

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Instructional Approach/Feeder[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Watchung	2	7	8
Hillside	0	11	15
Edgemont	2	2	14
Bradford	0	1	4
Northeast	0	3	2
Rand	0	6	16

Note. [a]7 % not matched

The data presented in Table 71, for the most part conformed to the responses from the sample population, who also judged the variable very important. Parents from Northeast judged the variable only important.

Table 72

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Friends at School/Feeder[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Watchung	13	5	0
Hillside	18	8	0
Edgemont	14	5	0
Bradford	3	2	0
Northeast	0	2	3
Rand	12	9	1

Note. [a]5 % not matched

Data from Table 72 somewhat conformed to the responses from the sample

population who judged the variable not important. Parents from Northeast judged

the variable very important.

Table 73

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Siblings at School/Feeder[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Watchung	9	7	0
Hillside	21	5	0
Edgemont	11	3	3
Bradford	3	1	0
Northeast	1	3	1
Rand	12	8	1

Note. [a]11 % not matched

Data in Table 73 mostly conformed to the responses from the sample population who judged the variable not important. Parents from Northeast judged the variable important.

Table 74

<u>Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Reflects Family Values/Feeder[a]</u>

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Watchung	4	10	4
Hillside	1	15	9
Edgemont	3	10	4
Bradford	0	4	1
Northeast	1	2	2
Rand	1	7	14

<u>Note.</u> [a]7 % not matched

Data from Table 74 somewhat conformed to the response from the sample population who judged the variable important. Parents from Northeast, in equal numbers, however, judged the variable very important and important. Parents from Rand also judged the variable very important.

Table 75

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Opportunity for Parent

Involvement/Feeder[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Watchung	4	9	5
Hillside	4	16	5
Edgemont	6	10	3
Bradford	3	1	0
Northeast	0	3	2
Rand	2	11	19

Note. [a]7 % not matched

Data in Table 75 mostly conformed to the responses from the sample

population who judged the variable important. Parents from Bradford, however,

thought the variable not important.

Crosstabulations between feeder schools and the twelve selection criteria

from the survey check list exhibited variation from the sample population

responses. Northeast parents as a sub-population varied from the sample

population for eight variables, Rand parents varied on two variables, Edgemont on

two and Bradford on two. Northeast parents judged magnet theme, reputation on

the street, friends at the school, reflects family values, siblings at the school, school

atmosphere and school location more important than the sample population.

Northeast parents judged instructional approach less important than the sample population.

Bradford parents judged reputation on the street and opportunity for parent involvement less important than the sample population. Edgemont parents judged magnet theme and reputation on the street more important than the sample population. Rand parents judged school atmosphere and reflects family values more important than the sample population.

Income.

Table 76

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Magnet Theme/Income[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Low	0	2	3
Middle	4	11	13
Upper	11	35	19

Note. [a] 2 % not matched

Data from Table 76 mostly conformed to the responses from the sample population who judged the variable important. The low income category, however, judged the variable very important.

Table 77

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Perceived Quality/Income[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Low	0	2	3
Middle	2	7	20
Upper	0	3	62

Note. [a]1 % not matched

Data from Table 77 conformed to the responses of the sample population

who also judged the criteria very important.

Table 78

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Reputation on the Street/Income[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Low	2	2	1
Middle	12	14	3
Upper	16	29	19

Note. [a]2 % not matched

Data from Table 78 mostly conformed to the responses from the sample population who judged the variable important. Low income category had a tie; equal numbers judged the variable important and not important.

Table 79

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Reputation of Staff/Income[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Low	0	2	3
Middle	0	15	14
Upper	5	12	48

Note. [a]1 % not matched

Data from Table 79 mostly conformed to the responses from the sample

parent population who judged the variable very important. The middle income

parents, however, judged this variable only important.

Table 80

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - School Location/Income[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Low	0	1	3
Middle	18	9	2
Upper	41	22	2

Note. [a]2 % not matched

Data from Table 80 mostly conformed to the responses from the sample

population who judged the variable not important. Low income parents, however,

judged the variable very important.

Table 81

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - School Atmosphere/Income[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Low	0	2	3
Middle	2	15	11
Upper	10	35	20

Note. [a]2 % not matched

Data in Table 81 mostly conformed to the responses from the sample

population who judged the variable important. Low income parents, however,

judged the variable very important.

Table 82

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - School Size/Income[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Low	0	2	3
Middle	2	5	22
Upper	0	23	42

Note. [a]1 % not matched

Data from Table 82 conformed to the responses from the sample

population who judged the variable very important.

Table 83

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Instructional Approach/Income[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Low	0	3	2
Middle	1	8	20
Upper	3	22	38

Note. [a] 3 % not matched

Data from Table 83 mostly conformed to the responses from the sample

population who judged the variable very important. Low income parents,

however, judged the variable only important.

Table 84

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Friends at School/Income[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Low	1	4	0
Middle	16	13	0
Upper	44	17	4

Note. [a] 1 % not matched

Data from Table 84 mostly conformed to the responses from the sample

population who judged the variable not important. Low income parents judged the

variable important.

Table 85

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Siblings at School/Income[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Low	2	2	0
Middle	21	6	1
Upper	38	20	3

Note. [a]7 % not matched

Data from Table 85 mostly conformed to the responses from the sample population who judged the variable not important. Equal numbers of low income parents who judged the variable not important, also judged it important.

Table 86

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Reflects Family Values/Income[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Low	0	3	2
Middle	7	12	8
Upper	5	36	23

Note. [a]4 % not matched

Data from Table 86 conformed to the responses from the sample population who also judged the variable important.

Table 87

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors- Opportunity for Parent

Involvement/Income[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Low	0	4	1
Middle	7	11	10
Upper	14	38	12

Note. [a]3 % not matched

Data from Table 87 conformed to the responses from the sample

population who also judged the variable important.

Again, crosstabulations between income levels and the twelve selection

criteria listed on the survey check list exhibited variation. Low income parents as a

sub-population, n = 5, judged magnet theme, school location, school atmosphere,

friends at the school and siblings at the school more important than the sample

population. Low income parents judged reputation on the street and instructional

approach less important than the sample population. Middle income parents as a

sub-population also varied with the sample population in one crosstabulation.

Middle income parents valued the reputation of staff less important then the

sample population. Middle income parents as a sub-population represented 29 %

of the sample population, n = 29.

<u>Education.</u>

Table 88

<u>Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Magnet Theme/Education</u>[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Technical School or Some College	2	2	2
College Graduate	3	12	8
Graduate Degree	10	34	26

<u>Note</u>. [a]1 % not matched

Data presented in Table 88 somewhat conformed to the responses from the sample population who judged the variable important. The technical and some college level revealed a three way tie judging the variable equally not important, important and very important.

Table 89

<u>Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Perceived Quality/Education</u>

	<u>Not Important %</u>	<u>Important %</u>	<u>Very Important %</u>
Technical School or Some College	0	3	3
College Graduate	2	5	17
Graduate Degree	0	4	66

Data from Table 89 mostly conformed to the responses from the sample population who judged the variable very important. Technical and some college level revealed a tie, judging the variable equally very important and important.

Table 90

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Reputation on the Street/

Education[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Technical School or Some College	1	3	2
College Graduate	10	10	3
Graduate Degree	19	33	18

Note. [a]1 % not matched

Data from Table 90 mostly conformed to the responses from the sample

population who judged the variable important. College level responses judged the

variable equally important and not important.

Table 91

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Reputation of Staff/Education

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Technical School or Some College	0	3	3
College Graduate	2	10	12
Graduate Degree	3	16	51

Data presented in Table 91 mostly conformed to the responses from the sample population who judged the variable very important. Technical and some college level revealed a tie, judging the variable equally very important and important.

Table 92

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - School Location/Education[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Technical School or Some College	1	3	2
College Graduate	16	5	2
Graduate Degree	42	24	3

Note. [a]2 % not matched

Data in Table 92 mostly conformed to the responses of the sample

population who judged the variable not important. Technical and some college

level judged the variable important.

Table 93

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - School Atmosphere/Education[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Technical School or Some College	1	4	1
College Graduate	2	12	10
Graduate Degree	9	37	23

Note. [a]1 % not matched

Date represented in Table 93 conformed to the responses of the sample population who also judged the variable important.

Table 94

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - School Size/Education

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Technical School or Some College	0	1	5
College Graduate	1	8	15
Graduate Degree	1	22	47

Data presented in Table 94 conformed to the responses from the sample

population who also judged the variable very important.

Table 95

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Instructional Approach/Education[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Technical School or Some College	1	3	2
College Graduate	0	9	14
Graduate Degree	3	21	45

Note. [a]2 % not matched

Data presented in Table 95 mostly conformed to the responses of the

sample population who judged the variable very important. Technical and some

college level judged the variable important.

Table 96

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Friends at School/Education

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Technical School or Some College	1	4	1
College Graduate	16	7	1
Graduate Degree	44	24	2

Data presented in Table 96 mostly conformed to the responses from the sample population who judged the variable not important. Technical and some college level judged the variable important.

Table 97

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Siblings at School/Education[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Technical School or Some College	4	2	0
College Graduate	16	4	2
Graduate Degree	41	22	3

Note. [a]6 % not matched

Data presented in Table 97 conformed to the responses of the sample population who also judged the variable not important.

Table 98

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Reflects Family Values/Education[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Technical School or Some College	2	4	0
College Graduate	3	13	5
Graduate Degree	7	34	29

Note. [a]3 % not matched

Data presented in Table 98 conformed to the responses from the sample population who also judged the variable important.

Table 99

Crosstabs: Survey Check List Criteria Factors - Opportunity for Parent

Involvement/Education[a]

	Not Important %	Important %	Very Important %
Technical School or Some College	1	5	0
College Graduate	6	12	5
Graduate Degree	14	36	19

Note. [a]2 % not matched

Data presented in Table 99 conformed to the responses from the sample

population who also judged the variable important.

Most of the variation revealed in the crosstabulations between educational

level and selection criteria from the survey check list exhibited from the technical

and some college sub-population. They judged school location and friends at the

school more important than the sample population. Two of the technical and some

college sub-population judged magnet theme more important than the sample

population, two judged it important, as did the sample population, and two judged

it less important than the sample population. Technical and some college as a sub-

population judged instructional approach less important than the sample

population. While the sample population judged perceived quality as very

important, only half of the technical and some college judged perceived quality as very important; the other half judged it less important than the sample population. The sample population judged reputation of the staff as very important, while only half of the technical and some college judged reputation of the staff as very important; the other half judged reputation of the staff as less important than the sample population. The technical and some college sub-population represented 6 % of the sample population, $\underline{n} = 6$.

College graduates as a sub-population varied from the sample population about reputation on the street. While the sample population judged reputation on the street important, ten college graduate parents also judged reputation on the street important, but an equal number judged it less important than the sample population. The college graduate sub-population represented 24 % of the sample population, $\underline{n} = 24$.

The crosstabulations between the five demographic variables and selection criteria variables from the survey check list revealed more variation when comparing feeder schools, income levels and educational levels. Specific variations along with additional details were summarized with each individual reporting table. No variation revealed in the crosstabulations involving gender and little revealed between race and the twelve selection criteria variables.

Crosstabulations -- Demographic Variables to Most Important "Single" Selection
Criteria and "Three Best Things" Variables

The next section of the data presentation looked at the crosstabulations
comparing five of the demographic variables to the responses given to question
number three from the survey, the most important 'single" selection criteria in
school choice and question number four from the survey, the "three best things"
about the Renaissance School. Note that, not all of the parents in the sample
population listed all "three best things".

Due to the quantity of the crosstabulations that eventuated from these
matches, summary tables gave only the peak, percentage frequencies, those that
appeared most often. Additionally, crosstabulation tables for feeder school,
income and education levels did not give percentage frequencies, instead listing
only the actual selection criteria response occurring most frequently. Any
exceptions to those peaks were noted within the specific group summaries and
each crosstabulation was again compared to results for the sample population
reported as selection criteria profiles earlier in the chapter. Tables did not
comprise 100 % of the responses given, and no mention was made on individual
table summaries when matches did not occur.

Table 100

Crosstabs: Gender/Most Important "Single" Selection Criteria from Survey

Question[a]

	Male Student %	Female Student %
School Size	14	10
Perceived Quality	9	7
Instructional Approach	8	6
Rigor and Comprehensiveness of Curriculum	6	6
Reputation of Staff	6	5
Leadership of School	2	5

Note. [a]Percentage frequencies reported above were those mentioned most often

and represented only partial data, not 100 % of the responses about the

crosstabulation inspected

In Table 100, leadership of school was a most important "single" criteria

for the parents of females students only. The responses exhibited otherwise

conformed to the responses from the sample population.

Table 101

Crosstabs: Gender/"Three Best Things" About Renaissance School from Survey

Question[a]

	Male Student %	Female Student %
School Size	38	32
Reputation of Staff	36	27
Rigor and Comprehensiveness of Curriculum	20	22
Instructional Approach	14	10

Note. [a]Percentage frequencies reported above were those mentioned most often

and represented only partial data, not 100 % of the responses about the

crosstabulation inspected

The data presented in Table 101 mostly conformed to the responses from

the sample population. Note, however, that rigor and comprehensiveness of the

curriculum was a more frequent response for girls than it was for boys, irrespective

of the larger male sample population.

Table 102

Crosstabs: Race/Most Important "Single" Selection Criteria from Survey

Question[a]

	White %	Non-White %
School Size	17	7
Perceived Quality	9	7
Instructional Approach	10	4
Rigor and Comprehensiveness of Curriculum	9	3
Reputation of Staff	11	0
Leadership of School	7	0

Note. [a]Percentage frequencies reported above were those mentioned most often

and represented only partial data, not 100 % of the responses about the

crosstabulation inspected

Data presented in Table 102 mostly reflected the responses of the sample

population. Rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum and instructional

approach were proportionally more peak frequencies for Whites compared to non-

Whites. Additionally, reputation of the staff and leadership of the school were actually peak frequencies for only the White sub-population.

Table 103

Crosstabs: Race/"Three Best Things" About Renaissance School from Survey Question[a]

	White %	Non-White %
School Size	54	16
Reputation of Staff	52	11
Rigor and Comprehensiveness of Curriculum	29	13
Instructional Approach	20	4
School Atmosphere		6
Magnet Theme		6

Note. [a]Percentage frequencies reported above were those mentioned most often and represented only partial data, not 100 % of the responses about the crosstabulation inspected

Data presented in Table 103 revealed that size, reputation of staff and rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum were peak percentage frequencies for both White and non-Whites. Instructional approach was also a peak frequency for the White population. Non-Whites judged rigor and comprehensiveness of the

curriculum over reputation of staff, however, and also judged school atmosphere and magnet theme over instructional approach. The sample population judged school size, reputation of staff, rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum, instructional approach, school atmosphere, magnet theme and leadership of the school the "three best things" about the Renaissance School.

Table 104

Crosstabs: Feeder/Most Important "Single" Selection Criteria from Survey

Question[a]

Watchung	Hillside	Edgemont
School Size	School Size	School Size
Reputation of Staff		Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum

Bradford	Northeast	Rand
[b]	[b]	Leadership of School

Note. [a]Percentage frequencies not reported, only peak "single" criteria listed in

order of most frequency, table did not reflect 100 % of the data inspected

[b]No data reported, population so small, no peak frequencies could be determined

Data presented in Table 104 depicted variations from the sample

population data. Watchung conformed to the sample population in selecting

school size most frequently but selected reputation of staff over perceived quality,

instructional approach and rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum.

Hillside selected only school size. Edgemont selected school size conforming to

the sample population but then selected rigor and comprehensiveness of the

curriculum over perceived quality or instructional approach. No peak frequencies could be reported for either Bradford or Northeast since the population from those two feeders is so small; each representing only 5 % of the sample population. Rand varied from the sample population selecting leadership of school above school size, perceived quality, instructional approach, rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum and reputation of staff.

Table 105

Crosstabs: Feeder/"Three Best Things" About Renaissance School from Survey
Question[a]

Watchung	Hillside	Edgemont
Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	School Size	School Size
School Size	Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	[b]Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum
Instructional Approach	Perceived Quality	[b]Instructional Approach
Bradford	**Northeast**	**Rand**
Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	Instructional Approach	School Size
Instructional Approach	[c]School Size	Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum
School Size	[c]Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	[d]Perceived Quality
		[d]Instructional Approach
		Leadership of School

Note. [a]Percentage frequencies not reported, only peak "three best things" listed in
order of most frequency, table did not reflect 100 % of the data inspected

[b]Tie, represented equal frequency

[c]Tie, represented equal frequency

[d]Tie, represented equal frequency

Table 106

Crosstabs: Income/Most Important "Single" Selection Criteria from Survey

Question[a]

Low Income	Middle Income	Upper Income
School Size	School Size	Perceived Quality
Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	Instructional Approach	School Size

Note. [a]Percentage frequencies not reported, only peak "single" selection criteria

listed in order of most frequency, table did not reflect 100 % of the data inspected

Data from Table 106 summarized, was compared to the selection criteria

profile from the sample population depicting most important "single" criteria.

Table 107

Crosstabs: Income/"Three Best Thing" About Renaissance School from Survey

Question[a]

Low Income	Middle Income	Upper Income
School Size	School Size	Reputation of Staff
Magnet Theme	Reputation of Staff	School Size
[b]Reputation of Staff	Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum
[b]Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum		

Note. [a]Percentage frequencies not reported, only peak "three best things" listed in

order of most frequency, table did not reflect 100 % of the data inspected

[b]Tie, represented equal frequency

Data from Table 107 summarized, was compared to the selection criteria

profile for the sample population depicting "three best things".

Table 108

Crosstabs: Education/Most Important "Single" Selection Criteria from Survey

Question[a]

Technical School and Some College	College Graduate	Graduate Degree
[b]School Size	School Size	School Size
[b]Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	Perceived Quality
	Perceived Quality	Instructional Approach

Note. [a]Percentage frequencies not reported, only peak "single" selection criteria

listed in order of most frequency, table did not reflect 100 % of the data inspected

[b]Tie, represented equal frequency

Data from Table 108 summarized, was compared to the selection criteria

profile for the sample population depicting most important "single" criteria.

Table 109

Crosstabs: Education/"Three Best Things" About Renaissance School from Survey
Question[a]

Technical School and Some College	College Graduate	Graduate Degree
School Size	Reputation of Staff	School Size
Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	School Size	Reputation of Staff
[b]School Location	Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum
[b]Leadership of School		Instructional Approach

Note. [a]Percentage frequencies not reported, only identified peak "three best

things" listed in order of most frequency, not 100 % of the data inspected

[b]Tie, represented equal frequency

The data from Table 109 summarized, was compared to the selection

criteria profile from the sample population depicting "three best things".

Crosstabulations with demographic variables and most important "single"

criteria and "three best things" repeatedly identified school size as an important

criteria. Additionally, rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum, instructional

approach, perceived quality, reputation of staff and leadership of the school

displayed high frequencies as responses. Slight variations were noted in most of

the crosstabulations. Leadership of school was more valued by the parents of girls and irrespective of the larger male sample population, rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum was more valued by parents of girls than by the parents of boys.

Instructional approach and rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum displayed proportionally higher frequencies with White parents than they did with non-White parents. Also, reputation of staff and leadership of school were peak frequencies for only the White sub-population. Non-White parents ranked rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum over reputation of the staff and atmosphere of school and magnet theme above instructional approach.

Feeder schools also displayed some variation. Watchung rated reputation of staff directly after size of school; Hillside singularly ranked school size with the highest frequencies. Rand ranked leadership of school higher than any other feeder. Income variations displayed as high income parents ranked perceived quality over school size and reputation of staff over school size. Magnet theme was a peak frequency for low income parents. Technical and some college parents displayed higher frequencies when evaluating school location and leadership of school. College parents rated reputation of the staff over size.

Crosstabulations -- Demographic Variables to Criteria Listed on Freedom of Choice Document

The final section of crosstabulations compared five demographic variables to the selection criteria variables listed by the sample population on their Freedom of Choice document. Summary tables were provided for each crosstabulation and

the data presented was compared to the Freedom of Choice criteria profile depicting the sample population. Only peak, or the most frequently occurring responses were listed, no actual percentage frequencies were given and the reported summaries did not represent 100 % of the data inspected. No indication was given for matches not made. Fourteen of the Freedom of Choice documents inspected listed no criteria.

Table 110

Crosstabs: Gender/Criteria Listed on Freedom of Choice Document[a]

Male Student	Female Student
School Size	School Size
Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	[b]Fits Kid's Needs
Fits Kid's Needs	[b]Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum
	Risk-Takers for a New and Exciting Program

Note. [a]Percentage frequencies not reported, only peak identified criteria listed in order of most frequency, not 100 % of the data inspected

[b]Tie, represented equal frequency

Data from Table 110 conformed to the responses given by the sample population for the most part. Parents of girls declared risk-takers above magnet theme which was the next most frequent response from the sample population.

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Table 111

<u>Crosstabs: Race/Criteria Listed on Freedom of Choice Document</u>[a]

White	Non-White
School Size	School Size
Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	Fits Kid's Needs
Fits Kid's Needs	Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum
	Instructional Approach
	Siblings at School
	Risk-Takers for a New and Exciting Program

<u>Note.</u> [a]Percentage frequencies not reported, only peak identified criteria listed in order of most frequency, not 100 % of the data inspected

Data presented in Table 111 varied somewhat from the responses of the sample population. While school size responses conformed with the sample population responses, non-Whites declared fits the kid's needs and instructional approach over rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum. Non-Whites listed siblings in the school and risk-takers for a new and exciting program more frequently than their White counterparts.

Data presented in Table 112 summarized, was compared to the sample population

selection criteria profile for Freedom of Choice document responses.

Table 112

<u>Crosstabs: Feeder/Criteria Listed on Freedom of Choice Document</u>[a]

<u>Watchung</u>	<u>Hillside</u>	<u>Edgemont</u>
[b]School Size	School Size	School Size
[b]Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	[d]Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum
[b]Risk-Takers for a New and Exciting Program	[c]Instructional Approach	[d]Fits Kid's Needs
[b]Siblings at School	[c]Risk-Takers for a New and Exciting Program	

<u>Bradford</u>	<u>Northeast</u>	<u>Rand</u>
		School Size
		Fits Kid's Needs
		Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum
		Magnet Theme

<u>Note.</u> [a]Percentage frequencies not reported, only peak selection criteria listed in

order of most frequency, not 100 % of the data inspected

[b]Tie, represented equal frequency

[c]Tie, represented equal frequency

[d]Tie, represented equal frequency

Table 113

Crosstabs: Income/ Criteria Listed on Freedom of Choice Document[a]

Low Income	Middle Income	Upper Income
School Location	School Size	School Size
	Fits Kid's Needs	Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum
	[b]Magnet Theme	Fits Kid's Needs
	[b]Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	

Note. [a]Percentage frequencies not reported, only peak identified criteria listed in order of most frequency, not 100 % of the data inspected

[b]Tie, represented equal frequency

Data presented in Table 113 mostly conformed to the responses from the sample population. Upper income level conformed exactly, middle income listed fits kid's needs ahead of rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum or magnet theme and low income listed only school location.

Table 114

Crosstabs: Education/ Criteria Listed on Freedom of Choice Document[a]

Technical School and Some College	College Graduate	Graduate Degree
School Size	School Size	School Size
		Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum

Note. [a]Percentage frequencies not reported, only peak identified criteria listed in order of most frequency, not 100 % of the data inspected

Data from Table 114 conformed to the responses of the sample population as they listed criteria on the Freedom of Choice document.

Selection criteria listed on the Freedom of Choice forms differed somewhat from selection criteria collected from the survey. While size of school, rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum and instructional approach were again frequent responses, fits kid's needs, magnet theme, risk-takers for a new and exciting program and siblings at school were also frequent responses from the Freedom of Choice declarations. Responses from the Freedom of Choice documents filed by the parents of girls listed risk-takers for a new and exciting program more frequently than the parents of boys. The parents of boys listed the rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum more frequently than the parents of girls. Non-White parents identified fits kid's needs more frequently than White

parents and more frequently than rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum. Non-White parents also listed instructional approach, siblings at school and risk-takers for a new and exciting program more frequently than White parents. Rand listed fits kid's needs over rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum. Low income parents were the only group who listed school location with a peak middle income parents listed fits kid's needs and magnet theme over rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum. frequency.

The qualitative and quantitative, demographic and selection criteria data collected from the completed surveys and the collateral documents and records was entered into a study data base. SPSS statistically summarized that data, presenting percentage frequencies for twelve demographic variables and sixteen selection criteria variables. The data gave illustrative information about the sample population and the selection criteria they used in choosing the Renaissance School. SPSS crosstabulations matched demographic variables, first to each other and then to the selection criteria variables to look for variations and patterns or relationships within the collected data; where there specific associations evident within the sample choosing population or the sample choosing population and the selection criteria they used to select the Renaissance School? Crosstabulations revealed variations more frequently in connection with feeder schools, income level and educational level. Variations connected to gender and race were more modest or non-existent.

The first section of Chapter Four, the data presentation, reported the summarized frequencies for all the demographic and selection criteria variables collected in the study's data base. It also presented the results of the crosstabulations for some of those variables. Both the summarized frequencies and the crosstabulations resulted in percentage frequencies. That exhibited as organized, descriptive data which was then used to analyze and evaluate the information compiled by the study's data base.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were a planned data collection design for this study, primarily included to collect collateral qualitative data regarding the selection criteria used in school choice decisions. Conducting the focus groups in association with this study provided refined data about the selection criteria used by the sample, parent population and extended understandings, by either collaborating or contradicting the descriptive data already collected and analyzed from the study's data base.

The purpose of the focus groups was not to infer from that collateral data, but instead to understand the selection criteria discussed. The intent was not to generalize from the focus group data, but rather to determine its range and magnitude. Finally, the focus group data would not be used to make statements about the sample population, but instead to provide insight into their actions regarding school choice. The data collected from the focus group sessions was not coded, nor entered into the study's data base. It remained narrative and was used

specifically in the data analysis and evaluation to provide representative excerpts from the subjects of the sample population, clarifying their identified selection criteria.

Twenty-four subjects from the sample population were selected to participate in one of the two focus group sessions. Eight parents participated in the session held on Tuesday, February 29, 2000 and twelve parents participated in the session held on Wednesday, March 1, 2000. Four parents designated to participate in the Tuesday night session, did not attend.

Of the twenty parents that did participate in the focus groups, thirteen were the parents of White students, seven the parents of non-White students. Nine were the parents of girls and eleven were boys' parents. Three parents had children with identified special needs. Six of the parents had sixth graders, six had seventh graders and eight were the parents of eighth graders. Ten parents had graduate degrees, nine were college graduates and one parent graduated from a technical school. Twelve had incomes over $100,000, seven had incomes between $50,00 and $99,999 and one parent had an income under $50,000. Fourteen focus group participants were moms (female respondents) and six participants were dads (male respondents). The transcripts from their sessions followed.

Focus Group - Session 1: February 29, 2000

The following was the transcript from session one which occurred in the first-floor, social studies classroom at the Renaissance School. The session lasted approximately ninety minutes.

Moderator: Now that you have had a chance to meet and talk informally, let's begin. All of you participated in school choice by filing a Freedom of Choice document at least once; that's how you arrived here at the Renaissance School. What do you see as important about school choice? Why is that an option that you like having?

Male Respondent: Well, for us it was pretty clear that when it comes to schools, it isn't one size fits all. Kids have different personalities and particular learning styles. Our first choice for elementary school for our son was the Montessori program at Edgemont. When it came time for middle school, we decided to go to the Renaissance School because we felt that school best suited his nature and the way he learns. We were also attracted to the relatively small class sizes and the personal attention we felt he would get.

Female Respondent: I ponder this question because we moved to Montclair from Manhattan where school choice was a fairly important issue; you just didn't always want to go to your neighborhood school. We thought we had moved to a town where it really wouldn't matter what school we chose because we thought they were all great and perfect. We learned, I think, that it did matter and that some schools as you said, are better for one child and not as good for another. We were really glad to have choice when it came to middle school some years later. We made a really big mistake with my daughter in thinking that all the schools were the same, even though each seemed to have a different theme. Her elementary school was OK, but really didn't meet her needs and she was basically tracked to

go to the same type of middle school. We were very glad we had some other option and could opt out of where she was expected to go for middle school.

Female Respondent: We have two children and basically the idea was that they would just follow each other from one school to the next. Fortunately, there was choice because Hillside was not the right place for our son even though it was good for our daughter. He started at Hillside, went two years and was miserable, having a very difficult time. We were able to choose another school for him. So when you're looking at individual kids, I agree, it's really wonderful to have school choice.

Female Respondent: Yeah. We chose not to send our son, who is seven years younger than his sister, to the Nishuane/Hillside duo because of experiences we had when our daughter was there. Looking at him now, and they way he acts and interacts and learns, he might have done very well there, but at the time we didn't want to send him. He did fine where we sent him, but he might have done OK there too; we were afraid.

Female Respondent: Well, I'd like to add something. I think we're all talking about how we feel about school choice. For me, it is a very confusing issue. You know, I'm from a very small town in Massachusetts, where we all went to the neighborhood school. Then we moved here and all of a sudden they overwhelmed me with pre-K and said, okay we have Nishuane; we have this, we have that. I really didn't know what my child was going to be or whether or not he would thrive in a very big school or whether he would do better in a smaller pond as one

of the bigger fish. I really didn't know and I found it all very confusing to be honest, at that level. At the middle school level, I think it is much easier, but we have lived in Montclair for a time now. Now, I know how he's developed and what his interests are and how he might do. We started our older son out in Edgemont because it was the neighborhood school; it was Montessori. We changed after pre-K because his pre-K teacher was very nice but she told us she would have our son for another year in a mixed class of pre-K and kindergarten that was like the pre-K class he had completed. He had pretty much learned everything, so we decided to switch schools. At that point, it was fortunate that I had a choice because I did not want him in the same classroom for two years because I didn't think he would learn anything new. But even with our second son, I found the decision so overwhelming. We put our second son in the school we were familiar with, which was Watchung. I don't know, I mean, I am happy with the decision we made for middle school, but I really don't know if there's that much difference.

Female Respondent: Well, I think there is difference; the difference I've found was not so much between Nishuane and Edgemont or Nishuane and Watchung. It was more about the switch. Nishuane is only K through grade 2 and then you have to switch. The switch from second to third grade at Hillside was totally traumatic for (deleted name). I don't think she really recovered from it. Then I had to fight to get my son into Edgemont because they had 250 kindergarten spaces at Nishuane. I told Dr. Osnato that I would put my son at Nishuane if they had K-5 there. I

don't think it's the size or the program. It's because they have the split. I don't think the programs at the elementary schools are that much different.

Female Respondent: I think we choose Montessori and Edgemont for my son because I had gone to a Montessori school and we had grades four through eight all in the same class. I felt very supported in those classes; they never just let me go. The teachers knew what I was good at and where I was. They knew when to back off and leave me alone and when to push me. When I went to high school, it was larger and I just floated; I made my mark and left. They never pushed me, they had thirty other kids to worry about. It was small enough that I knew everybody and they knew me but I got away with a lot. I wanted my kid in a small school where every one of his teachers would really know him. They would know his strengths and weaknesses and push him to do his best. I see it all the time in the big schools like Glenfield. I see kids just float through Glenfield, not that it's all bad. They are not bad and they get passing grades and I guess they learn. I don't think they are pushed to achieve their own personal potential and I do see that happening at Renaissance.

Male Respondent: Yeah. Our experience with school choice at the elementary level was very simple. We came to town and we looked at Nishuane. We got a lot of psycho babble from the assistant principal at that point. We looked at Watchung and they didn't seem to put us on that much and we really liked it there. Our first kid's experience at Watchung was great, so we sent another kid and it was great for him too, so it was simple. My own perspective as a parent was that I

had to come to terms with the district's policy first and saw that it was a necessity to achieve integration in a town which had been totally segregated. I think that when it came to middle school, choice became a bigger issue and in two cases we got our first choice.

Male respondent: It was hard for our son. We chose a school that most of his friends didn't, and so he left them behind. Our daughter needed more than the public schools could offer, so we sent her to private school for a couple of years, but she went back to Montclair High starting her sophomore year. With our last son, we had a new option, the Renaissance School and we were attracted by the usual stuff like the small setting and the great leadership and staff.

Female Respondent: Yeah. People here are adventuresome and still seem to enjoy their jobs. The content of the class-work seems really interesting although they probably do pretty much the same thing at each middle school. But here, there is the size and quality of the staff and a sense that your kid is not going to get lost in the cracks. All that argued for Renaissance, though there was a clear risk which was, how is all this stuff going to work out? How are all these bright, creative people going to improvise this, because at the beginning there was little more.

Male Respondent: Well, I don't think you can really have it any other way. You can't have new ideas and change without just trying. So you take one step at a time, and just feel your way and you know that some experiences will turn out better than others, but you just keep trying. Actually, I don't think that our son was as excited about choice as we were.

Female Respondent: We gave the first two kids their choice, this time it was our choice.

Female Respondent: We actually left it up to our child. We went to look at all the schools and then asked which one did she prefer. The family consensus was to try the new school; it was her choice also.

Moderator: Many of you have shared experiences in Montclair with school choice. Have any of you experienced school choice in another setting?

Female Respondent: Just briefly, for pre-K in Yonkers. We were thinking about moving but couldn't sell the house. We started looking at pre-K programs and they had this gifted and talented program that everybody wanted to get into. But the kids had to go for an interview and take a test. Our kid didn't get in so we didn't get our first choice and that meant we tried to sell our house even harder. Sometimes if you don't get your first choice, you get sort of desperate and look outside your town for other schools.

Female Respondent: Yeah, we had choice but it's been a while ago when we were in the Washington D. C. There was stark choice there because there was a very well endowed magnet school near where we lived but the neighborhood school was a nightmare, so it was really no choice at all.

Female Respondent: We had Freedom of Choice in Manhattan which was why we left. We were experiencing Freedom of Choice by proxy. I had a friend with a daughter one year older than my daughter. She literally spent hundreds of hours visiting kindergartens and then got up at 5:00 in the morning to be in line the day

they selected students for PS 84. The only reason her daughter got into PS 84 was because her father is Indian and she was on line at 5:00 in the morning. I told her I couldn't do that; I work full time. I mean I had enough trouble just visiting four schools when we moved to Montclair and it was time to look for a school for my son. That's why we moved. We wanted to avoid Freedom of Choice.

Female Respondent: It's true. When you are new in the community and you're hit with several choices, you really don't know which one will be right for your child. After you choose you feel like your have to defend your choice, oh yeah, my kid goes there because of this or that.

Female Respondent: I agree with you although I think it gets a little better when they are older. It's interesting that you mentioned that your third child had less choice in the middle school. Our second child was told, OK where do you want to go? We hoped he would say Renaissance because we really liked the faculty and the whole idea of the school and all the enthusiasm we saw. I mean I wanted to go back to school when I came. It was just so up-beat. But our son is the one that actually chose Renaissance even though all of his friends and most of the neighborhood kids go to Glenfield. He likes it here. He doesn't complain and even with the long hours and all the other kids playing outside, he really likes the time he spends in school. He seems very happy and well adjusted here.

Female Respondent: I think school choice puts a big burden on the parents, more than if there were neighborhood schools. But I guess it's necessary in that the

community still struggles with issues of segregation. It's like the choice is hard enough, but then you have to defend where your kid is or is not going.

Male Respondent: Some of it feels kind of phony to me.

Female Respondent: I agree. There isn't really any Freedom of Choice in the elementary schools now. There may have been, say like five years ago, but not really now. They told me to list my choices, 1st, 2nd and 3rd. Well, if they really wanted my choice, Nishuane would have not been an option at all. I didn't list Nishuane and yet that's where we were placed because they had 250 slots available. Northeast only had 18, there were 12 at Edgemont. It was ludicrous, there was no choice if you were White and male; they had slots to fill and so we were sent to Nishuane. I mean, so why put us through this if you know where the slots are?

Male Respondent: Yeah. I think it's a little idiosyncratic. I think the phoniness I was referring to is a whole different thing. It's like the elementary schools we spoke about earlier, they probably are basically all the same.

Female Respondent: I think it's getting more like that now, but that was not the case several years ago. It seems to happen as each school develops. They started and each magnet had a hook. Then the other schools and parents saw that working and wanted it for their school too, so they adopted it and some of the distinguished magnet theme gradually disappeared. Then you have the big push for standards, so everybody ends up doing the same thing pretty much.

Male Respondent: I think there's more truth than we want to believe, sort of agreed upon fiction, not total fiction like maybe some differentiation in the packaging. It's been there from the start.

Female Respondent: I think you may be right but there's another point. Once you chose a school you want to believe it was the right choice, so you buy into the package and you say this is how we do it at our school and so in a sense we all spread the fiction for them.

Male Respondent: You all are probably right but I guess I just see it as part of the game. I mean there are other methods of achieving racial balance that are far worse.

Female Respondent: I wonder if they've done a racial analysis lately and if we all just went to neighborhood schools, how bad would it really be?

Male Respondent: That's why we have Freedom of Choice, it would be bad.

Female Respondent: I don't think so. I live in the south end of town and it's really multiracial. They say the south end is suppose to be more black, but it certainly doesn't feel that way to me.

Male Respondent: Well, it's changed then, I mean since we lived there. I think all the neighborhoods are getting more racially mixed, but the school board spends a lot of time watching the housing patterns and the patterns for choice. They have to for transportation reasons. The other night they presented data from before integration and there were schools that were all white, 100%. I never realized

what it was like until I saw those figures, how segregated the town was. I mean it was beyond belief.

Female Respondent: You have to consider that it has more to do with more than with just race though. There are still very different neighborhoods in Montclair, with respect to housing value.

Female Respondent: It's interesting that we talked about other ways to integrate a town. We came from Boston and saw what happened to south Boston. Major problems. When we moved to Montclair, we really did not know anything about the community, my husband got a job here so we came. When it came time to put the kids in school, I got very worried because of our experience in Boston. People tell you all the time how well the whole process works here in Montclair and our experience is that it really does. Especially for such a diverse community, I think the kids do really well here as opposed to a lot of other places where they have neighborhood schools.

Moderator: Many of you must know someone who applied to the Renaissance School, but was denied admission. If we believe information coming out of central office, last year some 40-60 students were turned away, depending on whose numbers you believe. What happens to those parents? How did they feel about not getting their first choice?

Female Respondent: Well, last summer my friend was fairly mad because her son didn't get into Renaissance and they were going to private school, but then in September, he just went off to Glenfield and everything seems OK there. I know

several white males from my son's fifth grade class did not get in. We've lost contact with them this year, so I really don't know what happened.

Female Respondent: My daughter's best friend did not get into Renaissance and this year she is at MKA. They hope to try and get her into Renaissance as a seventh grader. I think most of the kids who don't get in just go to another school; private school is too expensive.

Female Respondent: Last year, it was unbelievable. I get the feeling that it will be bad again this year from what the parents said during visitation. Last year, we did not get in on the first go-round and I was really angry; I've worked in the district as an aid for fourteen years. I needed my kid in this school. A lot of white boys don't make it. On the second go-round, somehow I was there at just the right minute. I knew a kid who had been accepted, but their family had to move out of state and I called Dr. Osnato and said, that's my slot.

Male Respondent: We've had parents call us, or some of our friends, to ask for strategies to get into the school. It use to be that you filed your form and pretty much got your first choice. Now you have to write letters to everyone, the principal, Dr. Osnato, the board members. Your parents have to come to school and volunteer to run a community service project or plan the next fund raiser. Yeah, it's really cut throat out there. You have to say the right things on the Freedom of Choice document also, like you really understand your child and what his absolute needs are. Threatening to pull out of the public schools seems to work for some parents.

Female Respondent: A lot of White boys from Edgemont did not get in and the parents tried to be the feeder to Renaissance, but that would mean the whole incoming class would be from Edgemont and none of the other feeders could capture slots. Renaissance is very popular with Edgemont parents because philosophically, they are much the same.

Male Respondent: Well, I'm just grateful it worked out for us. Renaissance is the school for all my neighbors. That's great for (deleted name) also because he can draw on the experience of the older kids. They all complain like crazy about the homework and be shoved along, but my wife and I found it very appealing.

Moderator: One of the criteria listed on the survey you completed was perceived quality. The sample population ranked perceived quality as a very important criteria in school choice. Tell me what perceived quality means to you.

Female Respondent: Well, let's say you talk to someone and their child went to a particular school. So you ask how was it and you get some information. But then you talk to someone else who had a kid at the same school but had totally different outcomes. The perceived quality is how much you weigh each of the opinions shared with you.

Male Respondent: I think perceived quality has something to do with how the teachers and principal have been historically. If you have siblings that have been at a particular school, you have some primary knowledge about the school, otherwise you have to talk to people and find out what happened in their experiences.

Perceived quality also comes through the newspaper or if you see kids from a particular school in a group and notice what they are like.

Female Respondent: I went to the Board of Education and got test scores. Almost without exception, Renaissance had the higher test scores in every category. The population was smaller of course, but it was a very easy way for me to compare the quality of the choices.

Female Respondent: I think one of the reasons on the survey check list was interesting for me. The survey talked about the comprehensiveness of the curriculum. When we chose the Renaissance School, that certainly wasn't one of our criteria. I really didn't have a clue. We had already made our Freedom of Choice decision and then the district comes to us with a dog and pony show in mid-April and says, oh, by the way, we have this other school. Would you like to try it. It was all very vague. Sorta, well, we think we might be able to do this, and we hope we might get enough to do this and we might have this. We signed on hanging by our fingernails.

Female Respondent: I agree, it was a leap of faith for the eighth grade parents. I guess I just thought that they all have to go to the high school at some point, so they all will probably do pretty much the same thing.

Female Respondent: It just came to me. You know why I like Freedom of Choice? I don't believe in middle schools. I did not want (named deleted) in a sixth, seventh and eighth grade program. With Freedom of Choice to the Renaissance School, I guaranteed she would be in the sixth grade with no seventh

or eighth graders in the building. I'm not kidding. That was my primary reason for choosing this school.

Female Respondent: The kids now in eighth grade who came from Rand had the same experience. They were the first class at Rand and they have always been the oldest class at the school. Sometimes I think that sixth graders should not be with seventh and eighth graders also. I think their emotional level is totally different and their educational level is really different. I don't know what I'll do when it's time for my son to start middle school. I guess they have to start a new school.

Moderator: One of the criticisms leveled at school choice is that by allowing parents extended options, eventually we will break downs what little diversity and cohesion has been accomplished. Once again, we will segregate. Researchers maintain that parents have a variety of motivations for choosing, many they label as non-instructional and some would say that there are parents who present as more capable choosers. How do you feel about those sentiments?

Male Respondent: I think everybody in Montclair understands and it's part of the game you buy into. Freedom of Choice was started in Montclair to integrate the schools.

Female Respondent: I agree. There are parents who have a difficult time getting enough information to make the choice in schools. I'm sure there are parents who don't know how to make the choice. But we have to remember that Freedom of Choice was about integrating the school district. If we really believed that the main purpose for Freedom of Choice was to ensure that every kid got into the

school that best fits their needs, then integration would not be a factor. It doesn't seem to me that we can have both. How can we say we have a magnet system that allows you to choose just the right school for your child? I think what we have said as a community is that we are going to maintain integrated schools and that the whole fit the kid argument is there to make it more politically correct.

Male Respondent: I think it's all part of the issue. First they tried to look for explanations in the achievement gap. It doesn't seem any more that they label that as race related. There does seem to be some importance to how parents work the system, so I guess I would agree that kid's whose parents successfully work the system have an advantage.

Female Respondent: It was one of those thing that this generation had to learn, I don't remember my parents doing what we have to do for our kids.

Female Respondent: You know, it's one of those things that you need to know how to do, but I don't exactly know where we got the skills because my parents certainly did not model it for me either.

Female Respondent: I think it depends. My family is teacher after teacher after teacher. When I was in kindergarten and I was already reading, my mother went into the superintendent's office and said: I want her in first grade. And the superintendent said: Absolutely not. So my mom said: I'm outta here. So I got Freedom of Choice way back then. She taught us that because we went to schools she chose for us. My sons moans from time to time asking why he is not at Glenfield with all of his friends and I say: Because you're not going there. With

most of it, he is very happy, but from time to time, I have to emphasize my decision.

Female Respondent: Most of them are not really happy all the time in middle school anyway. It's such a difficult time in their lives.

Female Respondent: I'm not sure that it's something that just our generation learned. My husband is not here because he does not see it as the parent's role to work the system. We have big differences of opinion on that because I feel very inclined to work the system. He says I'm making waves and his culture does not believe that is a parent's job. So it is a very cultural thing. I think there are those of us in this room who come from a culture that says you can fight for your child's education. My husband's culture says that our child is really lucky to have a good school to attend.

Male Respondent: I agree that some of it is cultural values. When Rand started, there was difficulty in attracting minority families. Maybe Renaissance experienced the same thing. If schools are new and involve risks, maybe minority families are less likely to become involved.

Female Respondent: There are other factors which may affect what racial groups are drawn to a school, well, at least what economic group. Rand didn't start until 9:20 in the morning, and I had to be to work. How was I suppose to do that?

Female Respondent: It happens at the end of the day also. Glenfield and Mt. Hebron get out at 2:00 in the afternoon and neither of us gets home from work before 6:30. What is suppose to happen to our kid during those four hours.

Renaissance School's longer day was certainly attractive for that reason. If you assume that race and economic attainment are tied then I can see the argument, but I would be hard pressed to support race and economic status as interdependent.

Moderator: Sometimes satisfaction is tied to expectations being met and expectations give a window on to your selection criteria. How well have the expectations you had when you selected the Renaissance School been met?

Female Respondent: One of the things we were looking for was a small community and Glenfield and Mt. Hebron did seem to have that. I don't mean small classes necessarily, but a small community. Hillside was huge and (name deleted) was lost. She had difficulty making friends at Hillside. When we considered Renaissance for her first year and knew that there were only 75 students, it was where we wanted to be. She may not make friends but at least she would know everyone and that was a step. Our hunch played out. The first week she came home from school and announced that all the girls were in the same clique. Now that she is in eight grade, she has a lot of friends in seventh and she talks to all of them. The school is larger now and she doesn't count them all as friends but at least she knows their names. When the article about Montclair hit the Times and she was quoted and featured, it was very important for her to tell her story about her friends at the Renaissance School. Now she feels that everyone in the building knows her and that is important. A small community has made her feel as if she really belongs.

Female Respondent: I could say the same thing for my daughter. She is very quiet. She is a good student but she really doesn't shine until a little of the limelight is directed at her. Sometimes it takes her a while to get to know teachers, so we felt the same way. If she went to a smaller school, it would give her a chance to get to know her teachers and the block scheduling here at Renaissance helped, since every 45 minutes they were not out the door to another class. The small environment was truly a draw.

Male Respondent: For my son, there are some attention problems and just not the general ones because they are linked to some chronic health issues which he faces. We felt that a larger school with big classes and a lot of movement would be a major obstacle for him, so the Renaissance School was perfect for our needs. Here it's compact; they're all in one place.

Female Respondent: It's hard to get lost here.

Male Respondent: Yes, it is hard to get lost and all that has worked to his advantage. I shutter to think what it would have been like for him at Glenfield or Mt. Hebron. This is a good choice for him, the circles he travels in are smaller and he has all the seventh and eight graders on our block to look up to.

Female Respondent: I think aside from the size, it is the tremendous effort that all the staff puts toward their jobs. If you have a teacher that really knows you and supports you, they know when to lean back and when to push you. I think that's very important to achievement. The literature seems to go back and forth, size is important, size isn't important. When it comes down to it, it is very important that

the teacher gets close to the students and has individual experiences with them. I think that takes a special type of teacher and a special type of commitment. If size helps, good, but it may be more about the teachers.

Female Respondent: I think size is very important. My older child went to Mt. Hebron and the size, even there was overwhelming. It was absolutely perfect for the district to offer a third middle school choice, a small one. Middle school kids need that kind of attention, sometimes more than elementary kids I think. They go through so much and it's important while they're stepping out and trying to make it on their own, that they feel there is a base. I think a small intimate school can provide that. Personally and emotionally they need that.

Female Respondent: The houses at the other middle schools provide that base too. My daughter went to Glenfield and she always felt that the house was where she could go, like a home base.

Male Respondent: I think it boils down to the quality of the individual staff and we liked what we saw and heard about the Renaissance School.

Male Respondent: Our expectations centered on some kind of academic rigor, it was important to us, probably more important than size. More or less that's what has been our experience. I think it was our expectation, more than for our son , but now that he survived sixth grade, he even likes the challenge from time to time.

Female Respondent: Sometimes I worry about scheduling. The first year was really rough. I don't think they always knew where they were going or how they would get there. They never lost anyone though. Now, still, from time to time it

gets a bit confusing, because there are so many things going on at once. Who is out of the building, who is on a field trip, who is at community service. I'm not quite sure they always know what they're doing.

Male Respondent: The kids?

Female Respondent: Yes, but even the adults.

Female Respondent: The other thing that I really like about the Renaissance School is the involvement in the community. It was advertised as a community magnet, but I really had no idea what that meant. The utilization of the community facilities gave me a clue, but they are always in the community for something, and they walk everywhere. I really like it. I can't help but think it builds good community relations too. I think the public perception about our kids is good. I know the doughnut and pizza and yogurt shops all like them.

Male Respondent: I think your point is important to keep in mind. I truly admire the administrative vision and skill it took to but all the community connections together. I may be an administrators dream, but few actually see it come to pass.

Female Respondent: I agree. I think the students really have a sense of their community not to mention that they actually like to walk somewhere now. It's amazing. My daughter would not walk to the corner store and now we get her to go on three hour hikes. Walking is nothing, she thinks it's fun.

Female Respondent: I think all the walking and the breaks give them some down time they really need. They are in school two hours more than their middle school counterparts. The movement helps.

Moderator: If you had a magic wand and could change school choice in some way to make it work better or come up with a new plan that would work better than choice, what would it be?

Male Respondent: I don't think Montclair will change very much, nor am I sure it should. We have some very specific requirements here for diversity and integration and the system we have now seems to meet those needs.

Female Respondent: I think schools will change. It seems Nishuane is going through some type of change now. I see Bradford has changed over the years.

Female Respondent: I also see change because of the whole competitive thing. Schools are trying to draw different populations. Also the use of technology has really changed the system.

Female Respondent: My magic wand would make sure that there is more assistance given to kindergarten parents when they enter their children in the school system. I want a program not just for parents that ask for help, but a required program that everyone has to complete before your child is admitted to school. The program would work with the five year olds too. My program would be more than just go visit these schools on Tuesday and Wednesday. Staff would actually sit down with students and parents and look at the child and ask the parent some questions.

Female Respondent: They have that for pre-K.

Female Respondent: I know, but my program would test them in some informal way or in some way give the parents new insight into their child that they never

had before. The information might be helpful if we are still expected to choose a magnet theme in years to come.

Female Respondent: Some type of required program might be helpful. We talked earlier about parents who are less capable of choosing, this might help without singling them out and making them feel like everyone else knew what they were doing.

Female Respondent: My program would ensure that every parent understands, not just the ones who are savvy enough to know the questions to ask or where to go to work the system we talked about. Every parent comes to know what choice means and I think if we all talk about it, it will work better for all of us. The conversations need to center on practical stuff too, not just the alleged magnet theme and how many computers they have at each school. Take the start times for example. Parents need to know that different elementary schools start at different times. Like take Nishuane with it's late start time. If there is a low income family or single mom that needs to be at work at 7:00 in the morning, that really eliminates that choice for them. Then a selection is going on that has really nothing to do with the quality of the school and I sense that in the long run, factors like that can eventually re-segregate us. It's that insidious type of discrimination. I think if we talk about it and some people see the slight injustice it causes, we might want to change it. That would be good I think.

Male Respondent: The staggered starting times were a way to help save money when we lost the state aid for transportation.

Female Respondent: Right, but do you also see how that eliminates a school for a particular segment maybe and then what good is choice either for fit or desegregation? Also, I think there is less interest in choice as more of the elementary schools are viewed as equals without much difference. It becomes falling back.

Male Respondent: But isn't it a good thing that the perception is that all the elementary schools are equally good? Isn't that what we want?

Female Respondent: I think we want to say the school system is good but I believe if we don't pay attention to choice and actually engage the parents in making decisions, things will just go along and eventually you get that fall back position. One of the benefits I see of choice is that it keeps integration in the public discussion and prohibits us from becoming complacent about our values as a community.

Female Respondent: I don't see us falling back. Montclair is a unique community and people move here because they know we value diversity.

Female Respondent: But what is it that keeps that message alive. I think one factor is that choice forces us to think about the make-up of our schools.

Female Respondent: This is almost off the topic now, but you asked about expectations. One major disappointment was the foreign language program. I know we had to wait almost an entire year for the technology that was promised, but the foreign language program was in shambles for almost two years. There

seems to be two strong people on board now, but I'm disappointed that we as a

parent group let that go on for so long without demanding some relief.

Male Respondent: The problem you are talking about goes to the heart of what I

believe makes choice work. The reason we struggled with foreign language for

two years is because we could not attract and keep qualified staff. That's going to

be a problem we increasingly have to deal with as many of the quality teachers in

the system reach retirement in the up-coming years. If choice is really to work for

a district, each school has to present a quality staff, all the bells and whistles and

magnet themes are not going to keep parents happy if the staff quality declines or

if we allow certain schools to harbor the quality faculty members. As an ex-board

member, I see this as probably the largest challenge. Maybe we need continual

rotation, but just as parents want certain magnet schools and themes, teachers too

gravitate to certain schools. I really don't know how we solve that problem.

Maybe again it goes to the leadership of individual schools and more to the

principals we put in each school, I don't know.

Moderator: Choice in Montclair, even after twenty plus years still has its

challenges. As we close, I'd like to thank you for your time, participation and

insight. Are there any closing comments?

Female Respondent: (name deleted) graduates in June and she is the last of our

children. Sometimes it's sad to know there is no more choice, I guess until we hit

the college interview circuit. Choice has served us well and I think she's receive a

good education so far. I'm a little apprehensive about next year and the high

school. The place is so big.

Male Respondent: Both of our children came from small schools before they went

to the high school. It looks big but remember that the annex keeps the ninth

graders fairly by themselves for the first year. Also, we really saw for the first time

our children's interests and passions when they entered the high school. There are

club and activities and all kinds of choices. My guess it that the Renaissance

students having survived this experiment we put them in three years ago will do

just fine, at least that's my hope.

Focus Group - Session 2; March 1, 2000

The following was the transcript from session two which occurred in the

first-floor social studies classroom at the Renaissance School. The session lasted

approximately ninety minutes.

Moderator: Thank you for volunteering your time to participate tonight. You've

had a few minutes to introduce yourselves to each other; now let's get started.

Why do you think that school choice is important or do you?

Female Respondent: I think it's important because you have a choice of putting

your child in a school where your child will learn best. Parents know their child's

learning style, you know how they pick up information. You can go and visit the

schools, see how the teachers are teaching. Then you ask; is this the way my child

learns?

Female Respondent: I think that also it's important that a school fits you as a parent, not that it just fits your child. Parents should feel comfortable with the school their child attends. Education is very much of a team effort, so I need to feel comfortable, too. I need to feel my concerns are heard and that the administration understands me also.

Female Respondent: I agree.

Female Respondent: I think there's something too, about the whole process of choosing a school, getting into the school you selected. It forms a very interesting contract from the beginning, getting into the place you wanted. You are already where you want to be so you don't start out fighting the system.

Male Respondent: I think part of it is what we come to expect by living in Montclair; we expect to go to a school where there's diversity. When you go to a school in the neighborhood, I don't think you get that same feeling and choice is a way to ensure that everyone gets that opportunity.

Male Respondent: The whole process is very interesting. When I was a kid in the non-choice world, you just moved to a house and everything was predetermined, you walked out the door to kindergarten and then to first grade. There was really no thought, once you moved into the house, it was all decided. I think about my parents and the process, they bought a house and that was that. When I think about how it has been for us, particularly since we have more than one child, we're navigating through elementary choice and middle school choice at the same time. It forces you to constantly reassess your kids and exactly what you want for them.

It's a little nerve wracking, because you really never stop thinking about it. You know that at least one of your kids will soon progress to a point when you have to make another decision about school. It's a very different climate than the one my parents had to deal with and as I said, sometimes nerve wracking. It's hard because you second guess the decisions you make. As a parent, I think it forces you to become more attentive to what's going on and know that your child can go somewhere else even if you don't move. My parents never thought that way.

Female Respondent: It's like any other service also. When there's competition, there's a lot of striving among competitors to do a better job.

Moderator: Do you detect that competition, do you really think it's out there; most of you talk regularly to parents with students in other schools.

Female Respondent: It certainly was during elementary schools. Even when I visited the different elementary schools, the principals were out there, selling their school.

Female Respondent: I agree that the big sale was out there, but also there was more in the perception than the reality. They all seem to be putting their best foot forward and for me as a parent that sparked a degree of guardedness. In fact, I heard something on NPR radio about how people rate schools and how they rate their own school. What they were saying was yeah, the nation's schools are in trouble, but my kid's school is OK. So, if everyone think their own school is OK, then the schools across the nation would be in a lot better shape. I think the same

thing goes on within the schools in Montclair, and I think some of my friends feel the same way.

Female Respondent: I think the competition factor and the second guessing goes on throughout the sixth grade year. You always wonder how the child is doing, did you make the right choice? I often second guessed with some of my friends, particularly during the first six weeks of school this year, not necessarily that I put him in the wrong place, but more how was he doing? I think the idea of competition is tangible, particularly if you have a child that is not 100 % totally motivated.

Male Respondent: I think there's more competition now between parents to get their kids into a certain school. When we first came to town, you listed your choice and were pretty sure you would get that choice. As the population got bigger, you didn't have that same feeling that you would end up exactly where you wanted to be. It's part of it. I never felt intense competition with other parents but maybe there was an envy or a curiosity about whether or not my kid should be in their kid's school.

Male Respondent: If you're a White male in Montclair, there is competition. I know several families with sons who ended up on the waiting list for Renaissance and they yelled and screamed to get in. You see that type of competition.

Female Respondent: Well, maybe I was ignorant about the whole situation. The other day at the shoe store a parent came up to me and said, so I see (name deleted) got into Renaissance. I didn't understand the tone of here comment, but

it was a bit upsetting. I decided not to ask her why she had said what she did. Then I saw another parent at Back to School night who made a comment about (name deleted) getting into Renaissance. I've thought about those two statements and wondered what that was all about. What I heard from the district was that the school was not disproportionally male and non-White, so why wouldn't my daughter have a chance to get it?

Female Respondent: I think that as far as students are concerned, the competition for spaces at a particular school is not equal. They have to make every school look pretty much the same, racially that is. The school population for Montclair is more non-White, so if you are White, whether you have a son or a daughter to place in a school, there is more competition.

Female Respondent: It's interesting that you are talking about this competition. We came from Manhattan seven years ago and I promised myself I wasn't going to get caught up in this. But I did. You just can't help but be sucked into the whole thing, so we started worrying about what kindergarten (name deleted) would get in. Even when you come to the open house presentations, while you are still trying to make a decision, it's the sheer numbers.

Female Respondent: You're right. Knowing how few slots there are available at Renaissance and having heard from my husband about the 150 people that attended the morning orientation and then seeing another 150 there at night, all you really have to do is the math. You know not everybody's getting in and I think that made some people not even try, they were much more willing to put

down a choice they felt they would receive. Even so, if the schools weren't competitive, I think the parents are to some extent.

Female Respondent: I felt like it may not be worth the chance but we went ahead and chose Renaissance and got in. I'm glad we did. I also remember what it was like at the elementary level. Our older son went to Hillside, but when it came time for the next son to go to school, I knew Hillside was not right for him. We chose Edgemont instead. I feel like we have had the best Montclair had to offer all the way. I like the idea of Freedom of Choice for that reason despite the hassle it causes. It's refreshing to see something work.

Male Respondent: I think I really thought it worked better eleven years ago when my daughter first entered pre-K. I think it's different now. When we first came to Montclair there were more classroom spaces than there were kids so everybody got their choice. We knew the district was sensitive to racial balances but at the same time they were fairly adept at making everything interesting enough to make all choice desirable. I think it has changed somewhat over time. I think there are some places that parents definitely don't want their students to go. It makes me wonder what it is going to be like in five or ten years.

Female Respondent: What we have here in Montclair is a premier situation, much more than we are entitled to. So at some point, they're going to have to give up part of this.

Male Respondent: What are you getting at?

Female Respondent: What I mean is what we have here at Renaissance. We couldn't buy a building or a gym, so we went to the community and bought the services. How many other times do you think the Board of Education is going to do that for the students in Montclair?

Male Respondent: I don't know, but for me it has never been about the fact that we had gym at the YMCA or art at the museum. It was the facility, but the mover and shaker inside. That's the principal, if you don't have that you'll be disappointed.

Female Respondent: It seems like every school wants all the extra parts. I really don't understand it. This town offers so much in extra programs after school and on the weekends, and the cost is small. I guess I wonder why all the schools feel like they have to duplicate services so much. I think that's what makes Renaissance so great is the principal and its small size. We don't have a lot of the equipment or facilities that Mt. Hebron and Glenfield have, but I don't think that's what really matters to our kids.

Moderator: You mentioned size and the principal. What other criteria were critical to your decision to choose the Renaissance School? The literature says that parents walk around with a shopping list, see what's out there and then make trade-offs. What did your shopping list look like? What was it that you were looking for?

Female Respondent: A type of curriculum. I guess I mean a style. I like to see kids learn in more creative ways, not just read this and memorize it and give it

back to me two weeks later on a test. I like it when kids learn how to think and how to see multiple sides to issues. I think I detected that here and it was important to me to have (name deleted) exposed to that type of learning.

Female Respondent: I agree. I wanted a similar setting for my child. It wasn't one that I experienced as a student myself, but it is something I wanted for my son.

Female Respondent: I remember my days in middle school. We didn't learn anything, I don't think. It was just all social. I can't remember grades even mattering that much. It was a weird time in America and my community was growing and changing. I remember going to school in a trailer for a while but then we graduated from some big school that really wasn't finished. It was a school without walls, all experimental. I did know, because my experience was so different, I wanted more for my kids. One thing, I though intimacy would be better and the sense of energy I felt here. The other two schools I visited seemed rote.

Female Respondent: I sensed the energy, too. Also there was something different when the administrator came into the room and when see introduced her staff, you got the impression she really liked and knew them That made an impression on me. Also the student that was my tour guide the day I visited the school during classes. She was incredible. She told me that she was not an honor student, and that spoke a lot about the school and how they valued each of their students. She told me, I think that she had two or three D's on her last report card. She loved the school, her teachers, she said they were trying to help her pull up her grades.

Her mom came to school all the time to meet the teachers. Her attitude was that this was not going to happen again, she was getting her grades back up and she had such confidence that she could do that. She would say, this teacher is really tough, but really nice. She's two years older than my daughter and she definitely knew why she liked the school. That girl really made an impression on me. You can't just put your best foot forward when the parents come to visit if that's not how the school runs all the time. You would have to be totally naive if you couldn't see beyond that pretense. That was very, very important to my decision to choose Renaissance.

Female Respondent: I think that what I have learned from Freedom of Choice is that in the end, it's actually about the teachers you child comes in contact with. If they like the teachers, they like the school. I though there would be teachers here that (name deleted) would really like and I wanted him to have the opportunity to get to know and work with them.

Female Respondent: It's also the curriculum here. I like the way it's connected, the way they ask kids to think about the books they read or the experiments they do. Everything seems so much more, I guess applied.

Female Respondent: I think another thing that pulls me to Renaissance was the sincere invitation for parental involvement, in a substantial way instead of just bake sales and car washes. If you had an idea and brought it to Dr. Anand's attention and you wanted to try it with the students, she allowed you to come in. You can come to this school and make a difference; I'm living proof. I'm allowed to write

a grant, get some funds, form a recorder group, take them out of class from time to time to practice and now we have a full touring schedule of performances.

Female Respondent: You're right. It's not like that at most of the other schools, particularly after elementary school. I asked specifically during the tours at the other schools and the house leader said that too many parents end up just being in the way.

Female Respondent: You are usually not invited to come in, that has been my experience.

Female Respondent: We've lived in a number of states so we have experience outside of Montclair and it's pretty much the same everywhere else. The schools I was most pleased with were the ones where I felt welcome, and they seem to have the most interesting programs also.

Female Respondent: I think it will change when we get to high school. Our kids won't want us anywhere around.

Female Respondent: But doesn't it make a difference to know that you could go in even if only your child didn't want you there. One state we lived in said we could volunteer in the classroom, just not in our child's classroom. In schools where you feel uninvited, it's like what are they trying to hide or what is it exactly that they don't want me to see. It goes to trust I think.

Male Respondent: I would hope they would look at it from the standpoint of resources. With money so tight and always having to cut this or that because

there's never enough money, why wouldn't you make use of a professional musician who was willing to give time?

Male Respondent: Aside from the resources argument, I really like when a parent is asked to come and be a part of their child's learning. It makes it so much easier at home around the kitchen table, because then I have some idea of the expectations. I have a good idea of the teacher so I can help my child know what the teacher was asking them to do, you saw it, you were there, so you know what is going on.

Female Respondent: I hope I'm not the only parent here, smirking a little. I'm really not smirking, this is a separate issue for me in terms of parental involvement. There's a flip-side here. We've been struggling with the amount of work and the amount of time we have to be involved with our kids. I don't know how you could be a parent and not be involved, but I also wonder what happens to those children whose parents work two jobs or work so late at night that it makes it impossible for them to help their children.

Female Respondent: I think you have to allow children to reach their own level and let them put out what they want to do. I know I have my education.

Female Respondent: We made a big mistake when we started because we said, now you're in middle school and you have to take care of your own work. Within three weeks we had another plan. The 30-day organizer went up on the wall, we started color coding when things were due and it was all over for the hands-off approach. I tried, but it just didn't work. I know my child does best when he's

organized and so that's what we try to do for him. I suppose what we really need to be teaching him is to organize himself, but it gets frustrating.

Male Respondent: A couple of things. One is that I hear from some of my friends who have children at Glenfield that the homework, when there is some, is boring; the work is not challenging.

Female Respondent: And we know we're not bored!

Male Respondent: That's my point. The assignments are challenging, even for us. At Hillside, the kids had tons of work, but it was all busy work. The only thing was you had to try to stay awake long enough for your kid to get their homework done, but they didn't really need your help doing it.

Male Respondent: That's the key point. For the most part what we see assigned here is thought provoking and challenging. I'm not sure that's the case at every school. So, what we're saying is that we want our kids to be academically challenged by the school.

Female Respondent: I think it is different depending on what grade we are talking about. We were overwhelmed in sixth grade because there was such a difference in what was expected from the elementary school. Our involvement is different now. One thing our daughter has learned for sure is she's learned now to navigate a system that put lots of demands on you at one time. There's pressure here to do several things at one time. She still cracks from time to time, but maybe that's the best lesson she'll take from Renaissance School. We'll see next year when the

eighth grade goes to the high school, but as I see it now, that is one thing to their advantage, one thing really taught well.

Female Respondent: I'm not sure I learned that even in college.

Female Respondent: We mentioned it before, but I think it needs more emphasis. It's about the way the curriculum is presented at Renaissance. The material is a new look on doing homework. They seem happier, even if they are not getting straight A's; they just say they like doing it. They enjoy learning about the ideas that are presented to them and the assignments seem to have some thought behind them.

Female Respondent: Another thing is the staff at Renaissance. My son owes his life to them. He's really bright, but he works so incredibly slow. He could read a book for ten years. As a result, homework becomes torturous for him and us too. He gets a lot of support at school and we try to catch some middle ground at home. My husband usually gets him out of the house in the morning. Thank God, I would have a heart attack to do it each morning. There was just a look on his face last year, like panic, like getting out of the house and organized was just the start of his tortuous day. I'm sure his teachers saw the same look of panic, but they were calm and continued to work with him and I know there was a tremendous effort on their parts. I'm in education and we are trying to let go a little and what makes that easier is that I know there is a talented and caring staff to help us. It's better this year, but he still needs a lot of support and everyone at Renaissance was willing to work with him.

Female Respondent: I know what you are talking about. Our first son went to Glenfield and he was bored. He had homework but because he was bored he stretched it out forever. Our second son struggles, but every so often you see when it clicks for him; he is so happy. I think his teachers are good role models for him. They are helping him find ways to make it click more often, we can see it in his building self-esteem.

Female Respondent: I don't think it's my imagination but there seems to be a lot less complaining. Even when our daughter works all day Saturday and Sunday on a project, she never complains because she seems to enjoy what she is doing.

Male Respondent: It's the approach here, approaches that I'm not sure they would get anywhere else. When we took our tour of Glenfield, virtually every classroom I went into was doing the same thing, reading or answering questions from a book. How dull can it get? When we came to the Renaissance School every classroom we went into was moving around, organized but moving. The kids were talking to one another, they were doing projects, it was noisy and great. Where do kids get most of their information? I think it is from other kids and when you witness children conversing back and forth, that's when they are really learning. When I see that happening, that's the school I want my child to attend.

Female Respondent: They certainly talk to their friends a lot more than we did. Another thing, it does not seem particularly nerdly to talk about school. There does seem to be an ethic about learning coming from the very center of this program.

Male Respondent: My daughter complained when I turned the phone off for her at night because we expected her to do homework or read. She said she needed a social life and I told her she had one at school.. That's another thing about this place, they have fun at school also. I wish I had a social life like the one I see here. They have a ball here, out of the school every day going here and there. Then it's out for doughnuts on the way back from community service or out for lunch after looking for examples of weathering on the stone buildings downtown.

Moderator: One of the criteria listed repeatedly on the Freedom of Choice documents reviewed was risk-taker for a new and exciting program. Can you tell me what that was about?

Female Respondent: I think that remark must have come from the parent of an eighth grader. We all had filed our choice for the upcoming year and then they told us they had a new school, so please come. Well, there were some of us who know Montclair never lets a new innovative idea die instantaneously, so we said sure, we'll come to your new school, but I mean they were begging us. That's quite different from what I've heard here tonight about more recent attempts at admission.

Male Respondent: I remember they said that there would be lots of class trips so my son wanted to come for sure. There was also a group from Rand that had always had the oldest class and they and their families were fairly happy so when they said they were offering a small, middle school with the same vision as Rand, we all said, why not? It's confusing, it seems you have to get a big facility

together to justify a planetarium or green house or what every bell and whistle, but then the place gets so big, you feel out of touch. We were willing to try this new small idea they had.

Male Respondent: When you read in the Times and the literature out there that smaller is better and even the high school now is considering small houses within the school, you would hope that people get it. Renaissance was a move in that direction, but if you remember we had to justify ourselves for a second year of funding.

Male Respondent: It's hard to re-fashion the whole district as small but I think that's what they tried to do with the house concept. We haven't experienced it, but they say houses are just like small schools.

Female Respondent: It's not. The class size is bigger. Also, Glenfield sells you on houses then puts you with the same teachers for three year, which I guess if you like the teachers, it's OK, but what if you get into problems with certain personalities and then have three years with them. You are really stuck.

Female Respondent: Size, I guess I mean big school size isn't bad for every kid. Some kids thrive in big schools. And if they go to the high school, well then, they are guaranteed a big school. Maybe it's nice to let them be in a small setting for as long as they are forming and then pray you can let go and that they will make it in a big school.

Moderator: Most of what is offered up by policymakers in offering choice to parents is then dependent on the decisions parents make. As parents walk around

with their shopping lists, policymakers believe this will foster competition and break the backbone of a non-responsive bureaucracy within the public school system. So for one side of the choice argument, choice is offered as a reform strategy. Others use choice to desegregate schools and still others use the fit argument. What do you see works best about choice? What would you change? What would make choice work better?

Female Respondent: I felt like we were sold a line when we went Freedom of Choice at elementary school. I don't feel so much that way about middle school. In elementary school there was a lot of misinformation out there. You were lead to believe one thing and in fact given something totally different. I don't know why we even trusted the district again. So what I'm telling you is that if there is going to be school choice, they have to give out accurate information.

Male Respondent: Was it just the salesmanship?

Female Respondent: I don't know. But I guess with school choice at least there's an exchange policy, but it may waste a whole year to put into effect.

Female Respondent: Well, we were sold on the vision and mission of Rand. We read up on it and we decided to send our children there. Once we got there we found out that the model had changed and well, they weren't doing that anymore. So then we said, well the kid seems happy, and we're just confused but happy, so we just stayed. It also depends on the teacher and your own involvement in the school. I think if there are no major problems, you just move along and my idea

now is that the whole magnet theme thing is just a big scam, so you feel like you choose something.

Male Respondent: I guess I agree, maybe if I knew more about the models, I would see a difference, but in the end, it's public school, so what can you expect.

Female Respondent: I think you can expect a lot, I know my taxes pay a lot. Anyway, I also think there are subtle differences. Maybe the difference is not so much in the theme of the magnet any more, but there are management styles detectable within a building, particularly if you have a principal that's been there for a time or a staff that is really cohesive and been there awhile.

Female Respondent: I know Rand has really changed. I don't think I'm unhappy with the school, but sometimes I'm at a loss when someone asks, what's the magnet theme? I knew before, but now, I don't know what to say. I guess that could be problematic, but as I said we're still happy with the school, whatever magnet it is.

Female Respondent: I guess we've experienced the same thing. We did school choice a couple of times and when it was time for our son to go to school, the hot one was Nishuane because it was gifted and talented and they had Spanish in kindergarten and whatever. Does that mean the gifted and talented magnet? I think the schools have lost their themes and it has more to do with what teachers you have. The schools have differences and the school district likes to advertise those differences as magnet themes but they aren't magnet themes in the true sense.

Female Respondent: I agree, Dr. Osnato came to Edgemont and said what a great Montessori school it was. It isn't Montessori any more, it hasn't been for several years, but the district keeps calling it our Montessori school. We had one real Montessori teacher while we were there. The other teachers were good, but it wasn't Montessori.

Male Respondent: I can see why it happens and I'm not sure how I feel about it. The district puts a lot of emphasis on achievement and standardized test scores. That all runs contrary to the idea of magnet themes and having a school follow their own pure vision. There are many ways to demonstrate accomplishment but the district seem bent on test scores. I imagine there's a lot of pressure on principals too, and in effect they are competing with one another, not over themes but test scores. I remember a principal at Rand, at one point starting very aggressively to do lots of remediation with kids that were having trouble with reading. He said no child can be at Rand unless they are reading. That's admirable I guess, but the whole philosophy behind the Rand magnet was that children learn when they are ready and you support the skills as they present. I think it must be hard. I also think it is one of the downsides to this magnet district. The salesmanship to a point. Principals are proud of their school and believe they are doing a good job but then there is all this bureaucracy and pressure from downtown, that probably as an administrator, you are forced to pull back many times. You have to face the other principals and justify your achievement scores.

Male Respondent: I went on a tour of Rand about a year ago. The woman who took me around said how well their children do at Renaissance and how well prepared they were. My son went to Hillside, now he's at Renaissance and doing fine. I guess it was the salesmanship.

Female Respondent: Isn't it that we're all searching for the hot school and the hot school keeps changing on us. That's an irony in the magnet system.

Male Respondent: Choice is good. It makes us a little crazy, but I think ultimately, it's a good thing. Maybe if everyone gets a chance at a hot school, it's like the carrot on the stick. We'll all just keep looking and trying and staying around long enough for high school.

Female Respondent: I think the magnet system does work and I've been around the district for almost 18 years now. When a school starts to fall apart, they usually try to do something about it. The number one factor is the principal. If you don't have a strong principal at the helm, you can't sell anything. I've seen them get rid of principals too. When a school is not getting enrollment, the principal has to do something or I think they get someone else in there who can.

Female Respondent: I'm new to Montclair this year and listening to you all talk makes me think at least they have a choice that's doable. We came from Houston. There was choice but the other choice was on the other side of town, which in Texas, is an hour away and parents had to drive their kids. It's great that Montclair is small enough to allow choice to actually work. I think you are also saying that you like choice because it promotes change.

Female Respondent: Choice is great, I can't be happier with my choice here but what really scares me is the high school. What about that?

Male Respondent: Well. I'm on the redesign committee for the high school and I agonize over the same question you asked. I guess I'm less concerned for my daughter than I will be with my son, but I can appreciate your point of view. I'm probably going to send both the kids to the public high school. My hope is that by that time they will have learned some life skills that can help them at the high school. I mean, at some point they have to be on their own.

Female Respondent: I've worked at the high school as a sub and it's big and scary, even for me.

Female Respondent: Have you looked at our own eighth graders lately, they're big also and I guess scary. At the high school, I think it boils down to when you get to the classroom, it's more about a teacher, whether they have control of the class and are actually teaching an academic program.

Female Respondent. I think it's because it's then the end of choice. You feel like you had it for better or worse, but then at the end, in high school, there is no choice.

Female Respondent: Actually there is choice, but it's not yours any more, it's your kids. There are lots of choices at the high school. Sure you have the required subjects, but the mix and the electives are enormous. Then they have all the clubs and activities. What parents may still need to do is encourage their high school

students, particularly ninth graders, to check it out, they may be shy at first, but there is plenty of choice offered.

Male Respondent: I think it's going to be a rude awakening for some of the kids from Rand who have always been the oldest class in the school. Their freshman year may be a little traumatic. I have seen growth here though. We had tears in sixth grade at Renaissance and we don't have that any more. She has learned a lot and I feel she is well prepared for the high school.

Female Respondent: I don't think our kids are really as sheltered as we might believe. First of all, most of them have outside activities with kids all over town and they don't present as shrinking violets. Also, both my kids go to huge summer camps with lots of kids from all over and they love it and I guess I don't feel they are lost in the crowd.

Female Respondent: We said that what we feared most was the fact that choice ended at high school. But in a sense it doesn't. I mean, I've been attending to my kid's education now for twelve years and don't suppose all that will cease just because we go to the high school. It probably makes me more involved, even if it is in different ways. Like what kind of classes do you offer, what are the sizes of those classes. I can hear it all now. What's happening? Choice creates a society that cares what happens, I think some of that has to carry over.

Moderator: So, despite the frustrations and confusion at times, you'd rather have choice?

Female Respondent: I really think choice, whether it works they way it was

intended to work or not, has become the expectation for the parents of Montclair.

As long as schools keep working at giving us quality options, I think choice is

going to be there and maybe it helps keep us desegregated. I know I never want

to think of forced busing again.

Male Respondent: I would agree. It seems to be working, so why change it?

Moderator: Any closing comments? If not, thank you all for your time and input.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Four, the data presentation, displayed all the qualitative and

quantitative data gathered by the case study to examine the sample population

identified from the Renaissance School in Montclair, New Jersey. Section one of

the data presentation displayed the descriptive data, summarized through SPSS

from the study's data base and exhibited as percentage frequencies. The data

inspected twelve demographic variable and sixteen selection criteria variables

related to the sample population. Section one also presented the crosstabulations

for some of those variables; first comparing demographic to demographic

variables, then comparing demographic variables to selection criteria variables.

Section two of the data presentation included the full transcript from both

of the focus group sessions conducted in association with this case study. Data

obtained from the focus group interviews was first collected on audio tapes of the

sessions, transcribed, and never entered into the study's data base. Instead, the

data remained narrative and was presented as excerpts from the sample population

within Chapter Five to support the reported descriptive data about that population.

Collectively, the descriptive data and the transcripts were analyzed in Chapter Five

and used to evaluate the research questions posed by this study.

CHAPTER V

Data Analysis and Evaluation;

Study Implications and Recommendations

One highly touted, albeit controversial, modern strategy for public school reform is school choice. School choice policies provide parents increased levels of consumer selection at public expense. Without reference to their place of residency, school choice offers parents the opportunity to select a public, private or charter school, or an alternative program, through designs using tax credits, vouchers, magnet programs or open enrollments. Parents with school choice options acquire varying degrees of discretion about which schools their children can attend depending on the specifics of the school choice program available to them.

School choice, as one of the hottest educational topics across the nation, builds on the supposition that choice will serve as a catalyst for change to reform and improve schools. In offering school choice as a reform instrument, much of what policymakers have forecasted about enhanced educational excellence is contingent on the competition that school choice promotes. The increased opportunities for customer choice, shift power more towards the parents, thereby bringing new voices into the educational decision making process and exposing an overly bureaucratized system of education to the elements of market place discipline. If parents value high achievement, effectiveness or innovation and

exercise school choice options toward achieving those ends, an alleged monopolistic stranglehold of mediocrity on education will break, and reform will result.

Along with the expectations of reform resulting from increased competition, proponents of school choice argue that no one school can best meet the individual needs of every student. Acknowledging that desire to find suitability, support is also growing for the idea that parents can provide some precision in selecting and structuring the "fit" of their child's education through the extended school choice options.

Despite the theoretical possibilities, school choice policies have not escaped intense scrutiny and abundant controversy. Critics of school choice fear the policies will weaken social cohesion and result in racial or class polarization. Others worry that those choosing come disproportionally from higher-income, better educated classes, and that lower-income, less educated or minority and non-English speaking parents, those that might benefit most from the extended options of school choice, are essentially excluded from the school choice process. Critics argue that parents choose schools for many reasons that are unrelated to the effectiveness of the school; purported non-instructional selection criteria. In addition to the criticism of school choice as an educational policy, there were others who refuted the marketplace model arguments made to substantiate its effectiveness at reform.

Regardless of the contentions of the debate, school choice initiatives continue to advance. School choice and the added alternatives presented have already changed substantially the organizational patterns through which we have sustained education. School choice has re-defined interactions and partially transformed accountabilities within the educational process, fashioning a much larger and more complex role for parents. In light of that shift, the expectations regarding reform, and the many school choice options now available and those emerging, who is doing the choosing? What selection criteria do parents use to formulate that preference? Do choosing parents use differing parameters to make the school choice? If so, are there patterns or relationships evident between implicit selection criteria and choosing parents.

To examine those and other questions, a study population was identified from the Renaissance Middle School in Montclair, New Jersey. The Montclair Public Schools has a twenty-three year history of school choice; parents in Montclair are familiar with the options sustained through school choice policies. Configured around magnet schools, with a controlled choice adaptation and first used to desegregate the school system, the Montclair Schools were one of the few districts in the United States, and the only district in New Jersey implementing extensive school choice in the 1970s. The school choice configuration, magnet designation with controlled choice, arguably futuristic at the time of its inception, but not when contrasted with modern school choice implementations elsewhere, still defines how school choice operates in Montclair today. Beyond the original

goals directed at bringing about school desegregation, school choice in Montclair today subscribes to collateral goals about individual liberty and notions about best "fit". The Renaissance Middle School, the newest extension of school choice in Montclair, opened in September of 1997, and offers another school choice option for parents with children in middle school.

Unlike the two other magnet, middle schools in the district, the Renaissance School has no natural feeders, a contrivance based on pedagogy and magnet theme, which somewhat directs enrollment patterns within the Montclair Public Schools. At the Renaissance School, most students are enrolled because their parents deliberately chose the Renaissance School through Freedom of Choice application. That makes the Renaissance School unique in the district and explains, partially the rationale for selecting that choosing population of parents for study.

While many critics of public education call for reforms, some say education in the United States must be totally re-invented. If school choice is indeed a possible avenue for reform or re-invention, then knowledge about the selection criteria formulating school choice decisions becomes essential. Understanding why parents elect school choice and how they exercise the new levels of discretion which school choice provides, may point toward structures, programs or policy decisions needed to fine-tune school choice or re-invent the entire educational reform process. The expectation is that this study can broaden the base of research and knowledge about the selection criteria used by parents offered school

choice alternatives. More importantly, if parent selection indeed forms the pivotal position to the ultimate success of school choice policies, an understanding of that critical role may in turn suggest refashioning essential, cooperative roles for administrators, supervisors and leadership teams.

This examination of the selection criteria formulating school choice decisions did begin with certain assumptions and contained specific limitations. Foremost, it was site specific and limited by time. While the assumption was made that parents and communities alike seek the best possible education for their children, and go through some process to achieve that end, the impact of policy formation and the tenets of its fabrication were not the focus of this study, only an acknowledged contextual accompaniment. The examination was also confined to the characteristics of the selected research design and methodology and subjected to the particularities and interpretations of a participating, involved researcher.

A review of the published research pertaining to this aspect of school choice provided the research rationale. Specifically, the literature examined for this study speculated about the current resurgence of school choice nationwide, and submitted rationalizations for school choice as an effectual organizational paradigm by acknowledging the contextual circumstances and then directing the desired educational reform. The literature also investigated vast numbers of choosing populations elsewhere and specifically highlighted prior school choice research examining the Montclair Public Schools. In reviewing the research, particular attention was directed at who was choosing, the selection criteria used,

possible patterns or relationships which emerged from the examined populations and the identified benefits and obstacles resulting from the specific school choice implementations.

Prior research also provided the framework for the study expressed through selected research design and methodology. Case study was the selected methodology for examining parent choice at the Renaissance School. Attempts to identify, analyze and evaluate the selection criteria used by this identified parent population revealed a phenomenon interwoven with multiple variables, at times indistinguishable from the surrounding context of the Renaissance School and the town of Montclair. The context may have affected formation and execution of the selection criteria, establishing a type of causal relationship.

Case study expedited the inspection of the related variables within the connected context and allowed for the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data regarding variables associated with the population selected for study. Case study, formed around the prior theoretical assumptions depicted in the vast pool of prior research, also provided the comparative models for this study's evaluation. By framing and integrating the collection, analysis, interpretation and evaluation of the study's findings, theory mirrored for this case study the process used in most experimental investigation. Research design was essentially directed by the specific strategies associated with qualitative research.

Assuming that the parents selected for examination in this study made a deliberate choice about which school their child should attend, the purpose of this

case study was to identify and analyze the criteria employed by the identified

suburban/urban population as they exercised extended options afforded through

school choice toward admission of their children to a public middle school. Five

research questions focused that investigation of parent choice and the selection

criteria utilized. They were:

1. Who chooses the Renaissance Middle School?

2. What criteria were used to make that selection?

3. Are there detectable relationships between those selecting the Renaissance

School and the criteria they use?

4. Does the Renaissance School population display characteristics typically

ascribed to researched, choosing populations elsewhere or are there differences?

5. Are the theoretical conjectures highlighted throughout current literature made

evident by this examined population or do other conclusions result?

Specific organizational arrangements for examining the inquiries delineated

above were assembled through chapters in this study. Chapter One framed the

problem and provided a research rationale. Chapter Two reviewed the literature

and set forth a theoretical base and models for comparison in this study. Chapter

Three outlined the research design and methodology utilized in the study, and

Chapter Four presented the findings. This, the concluding and summarizing

Chapter Five, analyzed and evaluated the study's data within the framework of the

theoretical base and the research rationale, designating implications and

recommendations.

A study survey, archival records and documents from the Montclair Public Schools and the Renaissance School supplied the demographic data and the data associated with selection criteria for this study. The data, assembled in a study data base, provided information about twelve demographic variables and sixteen selection criteria variables associated with the resulting sample population. Focus group interviews collected collateral qualitative data regarding the selection criteria used by the sample population in school choice decisions. SPSS summarized all the data from the study's data base, presenting descriptive data reflected as percentage frequencies. Crosstabulations matched the demographic and selection criteria percentage frequencies to look for variation and patterns or relationships.

The resulting statistical data, along with the data provided by the transcripts from the focus group interviews and other narrative data, were analyzed and evaluated within the context of the Renaissance School and choosing populations elsewhere. From the breadth of data collected, the lens provided by the sample population, and the context of the Renaissance School and other choosing parent populations, the study examined the newest and most choosing population of parents in the Montclair Public Schools, the Renaissance community.

Who Chooses the Renaissance Middle School?

Demographic variables associated with this study of school choice were investigated through data about a sample parent population who selected the Renaissance School. While some of the demographic data characterized the

sample parent population directly, most of the demographic data was embedded; data about the associated students, presented as elaboration about the examined, choosing parents. Responses from the sample population indicated that slightly more parents of boys chose the Renaissance School than did parents of girls. Fifty-two percent of the sample population had a son at the Renaissance School; 48 % had a daughter at the Renaissance School. The results reflected the gender composition of the Renaissance School which was 45 % female and 56 % male. Results also reflected the population of the Montclair Public Schools which was proportionally more male.

Seventy-four percent of the sample population were the parents of White students and 26 % were the parents of non-White students. The results reflected a sample population notably under-represented by the parents of non-White students. The Renaissance School student population was 48 % non-White and 52 % White. Public school racial distributions reported 42.5 % White students and 57.6 % non-White students, while the racial make-up of the town of Montclair was 65 % White and 30 % Black.

Percentage frequencies inspecting the feeder schools represented within the sample population exhibited more students coming from Hillside. Hillside, however, was the largest elementary school in Montclair and had the biggest population transferring to middle school. Proportionally, equal numbers of students came from Rand, Edgemont and Watchung. Students coming from

Bradford, the traditional or basic magnet and Northeast, the international magnet, each comprised only 5 % of the sample population.

Percentage frequencies from the sample population reflected the feeder school representations within the Renaissance School. For three years, perceptibly fewer students have enrolled at the Renaissance School from both Bradford and Northeast. Bradford and Northeast are located in a northern sector of Montclair and may have had, in addition to their individual, magnet themes, a more neighborhood culture. Mt. Hebron, the middle school located in the same geographic section of Montclair as Bradford and Northeast, was the middle school traditionally "fed" by Bradford and Northeast, and ultimately may have determined the school choice selection for students from those elementary schools.

Percentage frequencies inspecting income levels for the sample population indicated that 65 % of the population reported incomes over $100,000. Best estimates were that the median income for Montclair was $65,882, with a New Jersey, state-wide median income of $58,448. Montclair has 2,200 residents living below the poverty line, and 19 % of the public school students were eligible for free or reduced lunch. The Renaissance School had 8 % of the student body eligible for free lunch; only 1 % of the sample population was eligible for free lunch. Twenty-nine percent of the sample population reported middle class incomes; incomes between $50,000 and $99,999. Percentage frequencies summarizing income levels reflected a sample population skewed toward upper income parents.

Educational attainment levels for the parents in the sample population paralleled the high income levels reported. Seventy percent of the sample population reported graduate degrees, while only 6 % of the population reported technical school or some college as the highest educational level attained. Twenty-four percent of the sample population had at minimum, a college degree. Percentage frequencies summarizing educational attainment levels reflected a sample population skewed toward parents with graduate degrees.

The special needs population, students with 504s, Special Education designation or STARS support were reflected within the percentage frequencies of the sample population. Fifteen percent of the sample population had students with special needs; 21 % of the Renaissance School population was designated special needs. No data was released by the district regarding 504s or STARS within the Montclair Public Schools, however the district reported 12.8 % of the student population with Special Education designation; the Renaissance School had a population of 9 % designated Special Education, the sample population had 8 % designated Special Education. No student admitted to the Renaissance School entered with a 504 plan in place; all the 504 designations were established after the student's enrollment at the Renaissance School. The Renaissance School had twelve students with 504 designations, three, $n = 3$, represented within the sample population.

Stanine categories representing the fifth grade Metropolitan Achievement Test scores for the sample population were predominantly in the above average

categories. While the percentage frequencies did not include MAT scores for Special Education students, 8 % of the sample population, 67 % of the sample population had math scores in the above average stanine, 67 % had language scores in the above average stanine, and 70 % had reading scores in the above average stanine. Only 2 % of the sample population had scores in the below average stanine for math, and 2 % had below average stanine scores in language. No below average stanine scores in reading were reported for the sample population. Percentage frequencies inspecting the fifth grade MAT scores for the sample population reflected the MAT scores from the Renaissance School population.

Demographic data from the sample population, statistically summarized and analyzed, revealed a descriptive portrait about that population which was evaluated within the context of known characteristics about the Renaissance School population. As a sample population, the subjects in this study were somewhat analogous to the Renaissance School population with respect to gender, special needs designation, MAT scores and feeder school representation. While the Renaissance School reflected the district's racial composition, the sample population for this study exhibited a notable under-representation of parents of non-White students.

It was difficult to determine exactly the extent to which income and educational levels from the sample population reflected the Renaissance School population or even the district as a whole. Prior research inspecting Montclair,

however, had noted that while the district was diverse, income and educational levels far exceeded national averages. Additionally, while accompanying data qualified the high income levels reported by the sample population, no additional data was available to analyze the reported educational levels. In light of the prior research examining Montclair, and the modest contextual data used to interpret and evaluate the reported income levels, presumably both the educational and income levels reflected from the sample population were partly representative of the Renaissance School; more likely, both essentially skewed in the direction of upper income levels and the highest levels of educational attainment.

Who chose the Renaissance School? Data collected about the sample population suggested slightly more parents of male students, more parents of White students, parents of students from all of the feeder schools, but noticeably fewer from Northeast or Bradford, parents of students with designated special needs, and overall, parents of high achieving students; more affluent and highly educated parents chose the Renaissance School.

Disaggregated data from the crosstabulations indicated that more parents of boys, proportionally, came from Hillside and more parents of girls, proportionally, came from Edgemont and Rand. Fewer parents of White students, proportionally, came from Hillside, Edgemont and Rand. Detectable income and educational level gaps exhibited between the parents of White students and the parents of non-White students, yet there was evidence of a professional population for both the parents of White students and the parents of non-White students.

Comprehensive demographic variables investigated in this study revealed a sample population partially reflecting the population assembled at the Renaissance School.

Eight years in the Montclair Schools, the last three exclusively at the Renaissance School, afforded the researcher the opportunity to enlarge upon the demographic depiction. Parents who chose the Renaissance School were educated consumers, very familiar with school choice. While parents went to great lengths to individually personalize the choice process for their own children, they valued goals of equity and educational quality for all children.

Parents were more likely than not to discuss school choice decisions with their friends and neighbors and their actions pertaining to school choice were deliberate. Many parents worked long hours and their children had au pairs, after-school programs at the YMCA or were latch key students. Many were single parents, now had blended families or shared custody of their children. Several dozen parents were raising biracial children. Parents came on class trips as chaperones; they volunteered in classrooms.

When parents came to the Renaissance School, they considered the school an extension of their own family. The parents who chose the Renaissance School were involved, enterprising parents who expected that the doors of their homeroom teacher, principal and superintendent would always be open to them.

What Criteria Were Used to Make That Selection?

Parents participating in this study overwhelming indicated that they wanted school choice options. Some parents called the extended alternatives, at times "a

burden", several expressed frustration resulting from the selection process, "it was overwhelming at times", and one parent contemplated what it might be like "if we all just went to neighborhood schools; how bad would it really be?"

Parents, for the most part, however, preferred the chance to choose. The percentage frequencies assembled after inspecting the variables associated with the selection criteria used by the sample population to make school choice decisions displayed many similar components while also reflecting variations. Numerous, diverse, but perhaps mutually related selection criteria, apparently determined the Renaissance School selection for this sample population.

The analysis and evaluation of selection criteria, however, acknowledged the limitations resulting from the demographic data evaluated about the sample population. The percentage frequencies summarizing the selection criteria used by the sample population were essentially directed by a sample population under-represented by the parents of non-White students, and skewed by upper income, highly educated parents; a sample population not entirely reflective of the Renaissance School.

Percentage frequencies summarizing responses from the survey check list revealed that perceived quality of the school, school size, reputation of the staff and instructional approach were the selection criteria judged most important by the sample selecting population. Friends at school, siblings at school and school location were more often checked as not important selection criteria. Important selection criteria included opportunities for parent involvement, school atmosphere

and reflects family values. The percentage frequencies summarizing the survey check list responses analyzed data from close-ended questions, not coded for inspection.

Additional selection criteria data, specifically responses from the remaining survey questions, along with the selection criteria listed on the Freedom of Choice documents, were all open-ended inquiries and the resulting responses, while individually expressive and specific, required coding before they were entered into the study's data base. Question number two from the survey asked parents to list "other" criteria they had used to make their own school choice decisions; criteria not included on the survey check list. The selection criteria most frequently mentioned were: leadership of the school, rigor and comprehensiveness of the program, length of the school day and kid's choice of schools.

Other criteria listed in response to that particular survey question which were mentioned less frequently, however, deserving note were: (a) risk-takers for new and exciting program, (b) information availability, (c) valued the diversity of the curriculum offered and the population assembled, (d) prior negative experience with other schools, (e) use of technology, and (f) fits kid's needs. The variety of selection criteria listed by the sample population, distinguished the Renaissance School population as a choosing population, demonstrated by the wide diversity of selection criteria used by that population to make school choice decisions.

Question number three from the survey asked parents to list the most important "single" criteria affecting their school choice decision. School size,

perceived quality, instructional approach, rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum, reputation of the staff and leadership of the school were the selection criteria most frequently identified.

Question number four from the survey asked parents to identify the "three best things" about the Renaissance School. School size, reputation of the staff, rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum, instructional approach, school atmosphere, magnet theme and leadership of the school were the selection criteria listed most frequently by the sample population. Asking parents to identify "three best things" about the Renaissance School was an indirect method for inspecting selection criteria. Three best things could reflect expectations met and expectations might be an additional measure of selection criteria. Responses regarding "three best things" essentially coincided with the responses obtained from the other, more direct, section criteria questions.

Selection criteria responses were summarized from the Freedom of Choice documents filed by the sample population. School size, rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum, fits kid's needs, magnet theme, risk-takers for a new and exciting program, instructional approach and siblings at school were the selection criteria mentioned most frequently by the sample population.

Regardless of the source, the selection criteria most frequently mentioned by the sample parent population were school size, instructional approach and rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum; school size the most frequent response. Reputation of the staff, leadership of the school and perceived quality were also

mentioned repeatedly. All the identified selection criteria seemed to be related to individual understandings about educational quality or educational environment. While several identified responses dominated the selection criteria listed by the sample population, the diversity of the responses was enormous and distinct. After examining all the percentage frequencies compiled about the selection criteria used by the sample population, several other observations emerged; the first two relating to the selection criteria examined through the Freedom of Choice documents.

Since the Freedom of Choice form became the formalized application form for the Renaissance School, the assumption was made that the selection criteria inspected from that source were authored with somewhat differing intent than the selection criteria responses summarized from the study survey. Freedom of Choice selection criteria analyzed and evaluated, essentially reflected that presumption regarding differing motives. While many of the same selection criteria from the survey also appeared in the Freedom of Choice forms, there were notable additions from the Freedom of Choice documents, no doubt reflecting the differing objectives. Conspicuous additions included: fits kid's needs, magnet theme, risk-takers for a new and exciting program and siblings at the school.

Furthermore, while not statistically evaluated, the selection criteria listed on the Freedom of Choice forms by the eighth grade parents were perceptibly different when compared to the selection criteria listed on Freedom of Choice forms completed by the parents of seventh and sixth grade students. Moreover,

fourteen eighth grade parents did not list selection criteria when completing their Freedom of Choice forms over three years ago.

In the first year of operation, admission to the Renaissance School was not competitive; every family that applied, gained admission. However, circumstances changed dramatically, and the Renaissance School was quickly over-subscribed. As a result of the intense competition for the limited number of slots available, applying parents sought advice from the established Renaissance School parent community regarding what selection criteria may be viewed most favorably; what should they write on their forms to ensure admission?

"You have to say the right things on the Freedom of Choice document...... like you really understand your child and what his absolute needs are. Threatening to pull out of the public schools seems to work for some parents." A fairly formalized network apparently developed throughout portions of the applying parent population. Aspiring Renaissance parents repeatedly consulted established Renaissance School parents regarding what selection criteria should be listed; what selection criteria might increase the odds of gaining admission to the Renaissance School.

While it was not the purpose of this study to examine or compare the selection criteria longitudinally, the evidence from the study indicated conspicuous variation and consequently acknowledgment that the data collected from Freedom of Choice documents accumulated and changed over a period of three years, even

though the Freedom of Choice selection criteria were analyzed and evaluated as grouped data in this study.

Additionally, most of the selection criteria data, either that collected by the survey or that collected from the Freedom of Choice document, was qualitative data and had to be coded before it was entered into the study's data base. The resulting statistical evaluations of the coded data organized and summarized identified selection criteria, providing descriptive information that could be evaluated for peaks, or the most frequently occurring percentage responses; ostensibly looking for themes and intensity. Inevitably, after coding, however, individual responses lost specificity and displayed instead as percentage frequencies about a generalized selection criteria response, one accompanied by fairly amassed meaning.

The fabricated vagueness of the selection criteria was further magnified by distinctive characteristics associated with the highly motivated and involved Montclair parent community. Accurately portrayed in prior research, Montclair parents displayed conspicuous sophistication and ease confronting educational jargon. Possibly somewhat lacking precision, Montclair parents, nevertheless, eagerly worked the system and implemented the language. Despite a depicted level of comfort, wide-spread use of such terminology by a lay population, subjected the selection criteria language to individual definitions, and that coupled with the in-exactness resulting from the coding of the data for statistical

manipulation, extended the likelihood of multiple, accumulated meanings for the identified selection criteria.

However, by analyzing the more frequently identified selection criteria within a context provided by focus group excepts and the solicited, concluding comments from the survey, individual selection criteria did regain clarity. Viewed from that perspective, the selection criteria used by the sample parent population recaptured specificity and meaning and did provide additional understanding and insight into the selection criteria used by the sample population. Placing the selection criteria first inspected through statistical analysis within the contextual definitions provided by focus group comments and survey responses, created a glossary for interpreting the selection criteria used by the sample population; ostensibly a lexicon of selection criteria. Arguably contrived, Tables 115 and 116 presented a stylized version of that conceptualized lexicon.

Table 115

<u>Lexicon for Renaissance Selecting Criteria, Chart I</u>

Selection Criteria	Definition
Perceived Quality	1. what other say 2. prior personal experience 3. the test scores
School Size	1. intimate 2. no bullies 3. provides added attention
Reputation of Staff	1. committed 2. enthusiastic 3. skilled 4. supportive
Instructional Approach	1. thematic and interdisciplinary 2. hands-on 3. student centered 4. inquiry based 5. likes to see kids learn in more creative ways
Leadership of School	1. teaching principal 2. accessible 3. visionary 4. sets goals and attains them

Table 116

Lexicon for Renaissance Selecting Criteria, Chart II

Selection Criteria	Definition
Magnet Theme	1. using community facilities 2. performing community service 3. walking everywhere
Risk-Takers for a New and Exciting Program	1. new projects get money and the district's attention 2. premiere situation 3. hanging on by our fingernails 4. leap of faith for the eighth grade parents
School Location	1. close to work 2. close to home 3. safe neighborhood 4. requires busing 5. does not require busing
Opportunities for Parent Involvement	1. felt welcome 2. know what's happening 3. in-put expected 4. a voice heard 5. sincere invitation 6. makes helping at home easier
Fits Kid's Need	1. parents know their child's learn styles 2. shy 3. big fish in small pond 4. chronic health problems 5. he's methodical
Rigor and Comprehensiveness of the Curriculum	1. expectations 2. innovative, creative 3. multitude of subjects 4. multiple points of view 5. connected curriculum 6. provoking and challenging
Length of School Day	1. resulting depth 2. seeing a project through to completion 3. something beyond the 2:00 dismissal of Mt. Hebron and Glenfield
School Atmosphere	1. encourages ideas 2. provides emotional support 3. feeling of community 4. sensed the energy

When examining the selection criteria utilized by the sample population, it was also peculiar to note that within a school district, conceived and built on and recognized for its magnet themes, there were few parents listing that designation as an important selection criteria. One of the distinguishing strengths cited in Clewell and Joy's inspection of the Montclair Public Schools in 1990, was the program diversity, basically defined through magnet themes. Magnet themes, however, did not appear to be among the most important selection criteria for this sample population.

That perception was confirmed and intensified after reviewing conversations from the focus group interviews. Parents indicated that they viewed little difference within the purported magnet themes, particularly as a result of their own experiences in the elementary schools. Furthermore, choices at the middle school level were determined using the diverse assortment of selection criteria mentioned before, but had little association with the district's advertised, magnet themes. Even choices not to attend a certain school, seldom seemed connected to the school's magnet theme.

Parents apparently had specific opinions about what schools were the best choices for their child, or the schools they wanted their child to attend. Those notions, loosely interpreted, were perceptions about educational quality or educational environment, and the choice was seldom associated with the traditional magnet themes. The following comments from focus group participants supported that observation.

The whole thing's a big scam. I think the schools have lost their themes and selection has more to do with the teachers you have. The schools have differences and the district likes to advertise them as magnet themes, but they are not magnet themes in the true sense of the word.

Basically, all the schools end up the same. They may start out differently, but as they develop, there's little difference. One school finds something innovative, something they say really works, and then everyone else has to do the same thing. Also, with the big push for core standards, everyone ends up doing pretty much the same thing.

It's a package we buy into and in a sense, we all continue to spread the fiction for them. I think there's more truth to the notion than we want to believe, sort of agreed upon fiction, not total fiction like maybe some differentiation, but it's been there from the start.

Not only did the parents interviewed in the focus groups regard the district's magnet theme designation as fairly fictionalized, they demonstrated through their conversations a rather complex and sophisticated accommodation seemingly prevalent within the Montclair community; something certainly differentiating that population. While parents did not believe true magnet definition existed, they generally accepted the ideological underpinnings of magnet design, and steadfastly acted out the chosen plan, clearly preferring that alternative above others, in an attempt to preserve an integrated school community.

There seemed to be a rather high degree of sustained tolerance within the parent community for the conventions associated with magnet designation even though the perceptibility of that designation may have diminished. The following comments underscored this perception and corroborated an observation that magnet theme, while not a central focus determining school choice in Montclair,

was, as an implementation of school choice, acknowledged for discernible benefits by this choosing population.

> It's part of the game. I had to come to terms with the district's policy first and saw that it was a necessity to achieve integration in a town which had been totally segregated.

> Freedom of Choice and the magnet schools are about integrating the school district. If we really believed that the main objective of Freedom of Choice was to ensure that every kid got the school that best fits their needs, then integration would not be a factor. It doesn't seem to me that we can have both.

> How can we say we have a magnet system that allows you to choose just the right school for your child. I think what we have said is that we are going to maintain integrated schools and the whole fit the kid argument is there to make it more politically correct.

> School choice forces you to constantly reassess your kid and exactly what you want for them. It forces you to become more attentive to what's going on....... There's a big sell out there, but it's more in the perception than the reality.

> It keeps us from falling back. One of the biggest benefits to school choice is that it keeps integration in the public discussion and prohibits us from becoming complacent about our values as a community.

> There's something about the whole process of choosing a school......getting into the school you selected forms a contract from the beginning. You are already where you want to be, so you don't start out fighting the system. It's important that the school fits the parent, too.

> Choice is good. It makes us a little crazy, but I think ultimately, it's a good thing. Maybe if everyone gets a chance at a hot school, it's like the carrot on the stick. We'll all just keep looking and trying and staying around long enough for high school.

Certainly, numerous and diverse selection criteria were used by the sample population in formulating their eventual school choice decisions. The selection criteria identified considered not only issues of educational quality but also issues

connected to preferred educational environments. Looking at the selection criteria profiles for the sample population substantiated that idea, particularly the profiles summarizing most important "single" selection criteria and "three best things". That perception, combined with the understanding about multiple meanings for individually named selection criteria, suggests that in all likelihood, when parents made school choice decisions, the selection criteria reflected connected reasoning about educational quality and educational environment; selections actually resulted from multiple selection criteria, not a single standard.

When critics of school choice critics alleged that parents choose schools for reasons other than their effectiveness, they were speaking about the non-instruction selection criteria; those regarding educational environment. What critics failed to recognize in that evaluation was that the values associated with educational environment, were for most of the Renaissance School parents, part of the equation, not to be singled out as if unrelated to overall perceptions about excellence. The formula that ultimately determined school effectiveness, the prescription that drove competition and allowed market place discipline to discriminate, may well have included the non-instructional criteria as critical components.

Not only was the significance of the educational environment reflected in the selection criteria of the sample population from this study, it was illustrated by the comments from focus group interviews. Parents, when they were asked to describe what determined their eventual school choice remarked:

The Renaissance School teaches kids to be independent thinkers, to think outside the box. They encourage self expression.

The Renaissance School is a place for kids who need to be challenged.

At the Renaissance school, one perceives a secure environment.

Word on the street is that the Renaissance School is a place for ambitious kids.

The Renaissance School is a place of hope where many children can flourish who may never have before.

....................a place where competition is not emphasized, instead personal attainment.

........a hands on administration

............a pioneering spirit

The Renaissance is a place for risk takers. We knew nothing about the reputation of the school but we also knew that the first class would get care and attention. We wanted a new creative program.

The Renaissance School is a place that is setting goals and actually achieving them.

I like the smallness, you always know what's going on. It's also a place where the staff can control the spirit and atmosphere of the school.

I like the fact that the place is small. Kids are at a vulnerable time in their lives and they need the expectations and the support that the Renaissance School gives them.

What you get at the Renaissance School is a small intimate environment with a quality education.

At the Renaissance School, the staff is enthusiastic about learning in the broad sense, not just about basic skills. There learning is a basic theme and attracts people who value learning itself and the process involved.

At the Renaissance School there is a perception of academic difficulty.....maybe to the exclusion of problem students.

Every classroom we visited was moving around, organized but moving.

At the Renaissance School, there is an ethic about learning coming from the very center of the program.

Montclair never lets a new and innovative idea die instantaneously.

I wanted my kid in a small school where everyone of her teachers would really know her. They would know her strengths and weaknesses and when to push her to do her best.

The staff is adventuresome, they still seem to enjoy their jobs.

............all that argued for Renaissance, though there was a clear risk which was, how is all this stuff going to work out? How are all these bright, creative people going to improvise this, because at the beginning there was little more.

.........it's about working the system. I don't remember my parents doing what we have to do for our kids. ....my husband doesn't like it, he calls it making waves and in his culture he does not believe that it is the parents job to aggressively select a school for their children.

.....tremendous effort the staffs puts forth, I admired the skill it took to put together the community connection. That is an administrators dream but there are few, I imagine, that actually see it come to pass.

School choice in the end depends on the staff, a quality staff. All the bells and whistles and magnet themes are not going to keep parents happy if the quality of the staff declines

Are There Detectable Relationships Between Those Selecting the Renaissance

School and the Criteria They Used?

The demographic data from the sample population depicted a skewed

population essentially represented by parents of White students; highly educated

and affluent parents. As a result, the percentage frequencies depicting the

selection criteria used by the sample population ostensibly reflected a rather

skewed population. Through the use of crosstabulations and the resulting

disaggregated data, the researcher, however, was able to inspect the specific selection criteria used by segments of the sample population not completely represented within the sample population data alone. Crosstabulations also checked for variations, pointing toward possible patterns or relationships between the sample choosing population and the selection criteria they used.

None of the crosstabulations associated with gender and the selection criteria from the survey check list revealed variation from the population sample. Crosstabulations associated with race varied on one selection criteria from the survey check list. Non-White parents, representing 26 % of the study population, judged "friends at school" more important than the sample population.

Variations from the crosstabulations with the check list selection criteria and the feeder schools were manifested. However, some of those variations, specifically those from Bradford and Northeast, while numerous, could not be considered reliable; small populations probably produced the variations detected in those feeder sub-populations. Variations observed from the Rand sub-population, representing 22 % of the sample population, and Edgemont, representing 19 % of the sample population, indicated shared values, distinguishable in the parent populations coming from each of those schools. Rand, the family magnet, as a feeder school, varied from the sample population, judging reflects family values and school atmosphere more important than the sample population. Edgemont, the Montessori magnet, judged magnet theme and reputation on the street more important than the sample population.

Income crosstabulations with the check list selection criteria showed variation as low income parents judged magnet theme, school location, school atmosphere and friends and siblings at school more important than the sample population and reputation on the street and instructional approach less important than the sample population. As a sub-population, however, they represented only 5 % of the sample population and the variations were not deemed reliable. Middle income parents, as a sub-population, judged reputation of the staff less important than the sample population. Middle income parents comprised 29 % of the sample population.

Crosstabulations inspecting educational attainment and selection criteria from the check list demonstrated some variation. Parents with technical school or some college, judged school location and friends at school more important than the sample population, and instructional approach, perceived quality and reputation of the staff less important than the sample population. However, those results were also viewed as unreliable based on the small, sub-population; 6 % of the sample population. Parents in the sub-population representing college graduates, 24 % of the sample population, judged reputation on the street less important than the sample population.

Responses from the middle income, college educated parents differed from upper income, graduate degree parents in judging reputation of staff and reputation on the street. Affluent, highly educated parents judged both selection criteria more important than the middle income, college educated parent

population. The variation distinguished the two populations and modified the skewed data reported from the sample population. Viewed together, the variations also distinguished the sub-populations and their individual definitions depicting educational quality and educational environments. Variations also supported assumptions that parents' motivations and preferences in school choice are more directed by socioeconomic/educational connections than by racial affiliations.

The next set of crosstabulations matched demographic variables to the selection criteria variables investigated through open-ended questions. The resulting variety of responses was analytically problematic, although variations presented and crosstabulations provided disaggregated data.

Crosstabulations inspecting the most important "single" selection criteria revealed variation regarding gender, race, feeder school and income level. Only parents of girls listed leadership of the school more frequently; and only the parents of White students listed reputation of the staff and leadership of the school more frequently. Parents of White students listed instructional approach and rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum more frequently than did the parents of non-White students. Rand parents listed leadership of the school above all other selection criteria, and upper income parents listed perceived quality over school size.

Crosstabulations inspecting the "three best things" revealed variations respecting gender, race, feeder school, income and educational attainment levels. Rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum were listed more frequently by the

parents of girls than by the parents of boys, despite the male dominated sample population. Parents of non-White students listed rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum over reputation of the staff and school atmosphere and magnet theme over instructional approach. Parents from Watchung, Bradford and Northeast all listed other selection criteria over school size; Watchung and Bradford parents listing rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum, Northeast parents listing instructional approach. Upper income parents listed reputation of the staff over school size, and lower income parents listed magnet theme over other selection criteria after size. Parents with college degrees listed reputation of the staff over school size and technical school or some college parents listed school location and leadership of the school frequently along with other selection criteria.

Variations detected from two feeder schools, Bradford and Northeast, variations from low income parents and variations from technical or some college parents, were not reliable; small populations comprised each of those sub-populations. The modest numbers reflecting the population of parents of non-White students, somewhat minimized the one variation detected respecting race.

Comparing the crosstabulations done between demographic variables and selection criteria listed on the Freedom of Choice forms reflected variation. Proportionally, more parents of boys listed rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum than parents of girls. Parents of girls listed risk-takers for a new and exciting program more frequently. Parents of non-White students listed fits kid's needs more frequently than rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum and

also listed instructional approach and siblings at school above risk-takers for a new and exciting program but all three to the exclusion of their White counterparts. Rand parents listed fits kid's needs above rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum Low income parents listed school location to exclusion of other criteria and middle income parents listed fits kid's needs above rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum.

The variations detected in the crosstabulations involving selection criteria from the Freedom of Choice documents must also be interpreted from at least three other perspectives. First, the selection criteria from the Freedom of Choice forms were designed to secure admission to the Renaissance School, the selected school. Secondly, the selection criteria on the Freedom of Choice forms were grouped data, reflecting changes over the last three years. Finally, in light of the consultation that apparently occurred between many applying parents and established Renaissance parents regarding the appropriate selection criteria needed to secure admission to the Renaissance School, variations detected regarding the selection criteria listed on the Freedom of Choice documents partially reflected variations about the counsel or advice obtained.

While the descriptive data from the crosstabulations exhibited some variation, the qualitative data from the focus group interviews and the solicited comments from the survey added insight about several of the apparent variations. One parent, commenting at the conclusion of her survey noted, " Word on the street is that the Renaissance School is a place for the kids with the highest MAT

scores. That could be a source of intimidation and limits who chooses to come to the school." Another parent indicated, "I think the materials presented at open houses and spring visitations need to be less academic. Parents of minority students, or less educated parents might perceive that the academic rigor of the school proceeds at the expense of the whole child." Conversely, one parent shared that she "knew the Renaissance School was the right place for her child. He isn't a prodigy and I know that he won't fall through the cracks there." Another parent offered an additional perspective. "If schools are new and involve risks, maybe minority families are less likely to become involved."

Viewed collectively, the variations first identified through crosstabulations, then substantiated by narrative excerpts, represented a "sorting" of the most frequently occurring selection criteria by different sub-populations, presumably reflecting individual preferences, values or beliefs. (Schneider et al., 1998) Some critics would say the sorting distinguished individual choosing populations. The sorting probably associated with the socioeconomic and educational levels of the responding parents. Only one of the variations noted from the crosstabulations occurred at the exclusion of all other selection criteria. Comprehensively, the variations detected through crosstabulations also corroborated speculations respecting the use of multiple selection criteria by the sample population.

Parents contemplating school choice used selection criteria associated with aspects of both educational quality and education environment. What distinguished individual choosing populations within the sample population was the

relative emphasis each parent population placed on the elements of educational quality as opposed to emphasis on the elements of educational environment or the comparative ranking within each larger designation. For some parents, issues connected to educational quality accentuated the selection criteria; for others, issues connected to educational environment were emphasized. Even within the two larger designations, educational quality and educational environment, some parents judged school atmosphere more important than school size or instructional approach more important than rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum. The selection criteria profile for most important "single" selection criteria and "three best things" supports that speculation. When parents judged school atmosphere over instructional approach or school location over rigor and comprehensiveness of the curriculum and reputation of the staff, they completed assortments. Regardless of prioritization, the presumption was that both values worked in conjunction inclining the eventual school choice decision for parents at the Renaissance School.

Suggesting that parents sorted the selection criteria related to educational quality and educational environment did not imply at all a conscious decision on the part of the selecting parents. What presumably transpired was that parents contemplating school choice looked for a constellation of attributes which depicted their individual perception about the best school for their child. The reasons they listed, the selection criteria, spoke to related issues of educational quality and education environments; conventions of academic communication. The

contemplation and ultimate choice was rather unconscious and in reality more reflective of them as parents.

Researchers declaring that parents have differing motivations to chose, undoubtedly, were acknowledging this idea about sorting selection criteria (Elmore & Fuller, 1996). The sorting of selection criteria continues as parents evaluate specific, individual elements within either educational quality and educational environment. Parents who choose schools that emphasize educational quality through high scores on standardized test as opposed to parents who choose schools who celebrate the portfolios of their students or the student's performance assessment projects are sorting (Schneider et al., 1998). The parents who choose high standardized test scores do not value educational quality any less than the parents who look at the accomplishments of portfolios or assessment projects; they choose instead educational quality demonstrated in more concrete and less subjective ways. The likelihood of a child getting into a good college and then obtaining a well paying job seems to them, more plausible if the standardized test scores are superior.

One final comment regarding variations, patterns or relationships. When viewing variations, caution needed to be utilized in then deducing patterns and assigning relationships. While the variations maybe meaningful, equating them with specific sub-populations or specific groups of parents may be detrimental. Patterns and relationships carry the implied risk of stereotyping and labeling;

tagging a particular population at the expense of completely understanding the variations of the selection criteria characterized.

Understanding varied and diverse reasons for school choice can combat subtle discrimination and preclude particular selection criteria from becoming impediments to true educational equity. Using knowledge about the variations of selection criteria to understand the actions of selecting parents is beneficial; using the selection criteria or resulting variations to make statements about the populations may not be. Variations have scope and intensity, instrumental if understood. Generalizing about those dimensions or judging their limits is not advantageous.

When identified patterns and relationships define the associated population instead of the characteristics inspected, significance becomes suspicious. An inclination towards that type of classification may be more connected to advancing the ideas of certain educational philosophies than to understanding the selection criteria or the variations depicted. The attempts of school choice to address issues of cultural pluralism and diversity in educational values and beliefs are served most fairly and effectively by allowing selection criteria variations to be only somewhat definitive.

<u>Does the Renaissance School Population Display Characteristics Typically</u>

<u>Ascribed to Researched, Choosing Populations Elsewhere or Are There</u>

<u>Differences?</u>

In many respects, the Renaissance School population was quite unlike the

vast numbers of choosing populations elsewhere. The distinction began within the

setting of the school, the public schools and community of Montclair, New Jersey.

Described repeatedly in prior research, Montclair was a unique, urban district. A

particularly motivated and involved population called Montclair home. Racially

diverse, committed to the goals of educational integration and educational quality

and equity for all students, the town, while somewhat diverse in terms of

socioeconomic levels, still far exceeded national averages with respect to income

and educational attainment. Montclair had a long history of school choice and the

success of the school choice implementation was traced to other distinguishing

characteristics about the town..

Geographically, Montclair was small and compact. Ample resources and a

highly motivated and active parent population made the school choice

implementation in Montclair somewhat easier than in many districts across the

United States. First used to desegregate the Montclair Public Schools in 1977,

school choice was something Montclair citizens had come to expect. While close

to the amenities of New York and Newark, Montclair was still very much is own

community supporting an art museum, a university, a baseball team and several

thriving, up-scale commercial neighborhoods. If there were characteristics

Montclair shared with other communities, goals related to the constant struggle to bring a quality education to all students, to maintaining a fiscally stable school budget considering reduced state and federal funding and to the retention of voluntary, integrated schools would have topped the list.

The Renaissance Middle School was distinctive in Montclair. Opening in September of 1997, the school offered parents with middle school students a bold new magnet option. Most of the students at the Renaissance School were there because their parents deliberately chose the Renaissance School through Freedom of Choice. While school choice defined public education in Montclair, there was a rather elaborate system of traditional feeder schools that decided many student admissions. But because the Renaissance School was new, no natural feeders had been established, so to get to the Renaissance School, parents had to apply through Freedom of Choice. Not only were most of the students at the Renaissance School there by deliberate choice, so were most of the faculty members.

Housed in a facility rented from and shared with the Immaculate Church and the Immaculate High School, alternate community facilities also provided the instructional sites and instructors supporting the Renaissance curriculum. Conceived as a small, community based magnet, the Renaissance School program was fashioned on an extended day program and due to size limits of the facility, school population could not exceed 225 students. That did make competition keen each spring as admissions were submitted, but the same controlled choice policy

regulating the rest of the district's schools guided admissions at the Renaissance School. In the last two years, the Renaissance has been close to 100 % over-subscribed.

While some parents and community members viewed the Renaissance School as a school for only the most motivated, academically excellent students, admission policies neither demanded nor supported that notion. Offering a rigorous program connected to numerous and diverse academic disciplines, the Renaissance School did attract highly motivated and talented students, but at the same time many parents chose the Renaissance School because of its small, nurturing and supportive environment. Twenty-one percent of the Renaissance School population had identified special needs. At the Renaissance School, students who may not have flourished in more traditional settings, found a new love about learning and a fresh appreciation for themselves as Renaissance people.

The sample population formed to examine the research questions connected to this study about school choice was only partially reflective of the Renaissance School population. Of the one hundred subjects involved in this study, only 26 % were the parents of non-White students. Seventy percent of the sample population had graduate degrees and 65 % of the study population reported household incomes over $100,000. Eight percent of the Renaissance School population was eligible for free lunch; 1 % of the sample population.

While the data inspecting the selection criteria used by the Renaissance School parents was skewed by the sample population demographics described, the

examination, nonetheless gave a partial picture about how this population of parents selected the Renaissance School. The Renaissance parents used numerous and diverse selection criteria to choose the Renaissance School. The eighth grade parents, particularly, represented a group of parents who were risk takers and visionaries The culture assembled at the Renaissance School was distinct and typified a sentiment familiar to Montclair some parents, "novel and unique is where the district's money will go, so why not?" A visionary and talented principal and well-respected staff made the Renaissance School the current "hot" place to be.

The sample population assembled for this study presented a group of highly motivated, at times competitive parents, knowledgeable and skilled in the organizational nuances about how school choice operates. If parents did not have the time to work the system, the effect of their family social class certainly gave them the connections to work the system. Still committed to integrated schools, parents at the Renaissance School were eager to extend support to aspiring Renaissance School parents and children. Parents who selected the Renaissance School evaluated the aspects regarding both educational quality and educational environment to choose the Renaissance School, but additionally were parents who could "think outside the box." Repeatedly, in explaining their reasons for choosing they explained that they "valued learning and the process itself" and wanted to "see their children become independent thinkers."

If there were similarities between this sample population and other choosing populations, they were that this parent population, like many parent

populations elsewhere, were looking for an exceptional educational experience for their children within the public schools. They wanted school choice and made use of the options presented in an attempt to find the best situation for their children.

In some ways, the Renaissance School was very typical of Montclair as a unique community. Many students, from varying racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, each with differing abilities and needs, whose parents worked in professionally varied environments selected to come to the Renaissance School. Using wide ranging, diverse selection criteria, sometimes conspicuously contrary, all found a niche at the Renaissance School. That, with differing descriptions, also characterized the town of Montclair.

Are the Theoretical Conjectures Highlighted Throughout Current Literature Made Evident by This Examined Population or Do Other Conclusions Result?

Speculations highlighted in published research pointed to the benefits or obstacles resulting from extended school choice policies. Proponents of school choice argued school choice would be the catalyst for change and result in desired educational reforms. Critics of school choice reasoned the extended options would lead to increased polarization, destroy social cohesion and were available to only the most advantaged families. Evidence from this investigation of the Renaissance School parent population and the selection criteria they used in school choice decisions, challenged some of those conjectures and provided added understanding about others.

Criticism of school choice came from researchers who said that the policies of school choice would weaken social cohesion (Bhagavan, 1996); ostensibly allowing options through school choice would break up communities. Research examining magnet school implementations repeatedly discounted that notion; though arguably community was redefined. Magnets, as an extension of school choice, were recognized for the enhanced communities that they created (Morton, 1991). Magnets offered safe, orderly climates of educational excellence.

Parents selecting the Renaissance School through school choice also created an enhanced community of educational excellence. Various researchers also used the term "social capital" to describe the extended caring community that resulted as those parents chose the school their children would attend. Coleman (1990) affirmed parent choice went toward building social capital. The partnership that resulted when parents exercised school choice created diverse social relationships that fostered a child's growth and development (Coleman, 1990). A community ethic of mutual caring shaped the identity of the school formed through school choice. (Wilson & Rossman, 1986).

One Renaissance parent summed up the notion social capital and the sense of community in another way.

> I think there's something too, about the whole process of choosing a school, getting into the school you selected. It forms a very interesting contract from the beginning, getting into the place you wanted. You are already where you want to be so you don't start out fighting the system.

Critics also argued that school choice would intensify racial and class polarization (Bhagavan, 1996) essentially creating schools for different classes and races of children. Segregation and polarization were the product of a variety of forces, perhaps the most important, residential patterns extending from social class (Schneider et al., 1998). The policies of school choice in Montclair did not outwardly support either racial or social class divisions; school choice extended to all parents, irrespective of their place of residency. Segregation was not the result of school choice in Montclair; controlled choice, however controversial, maintained racially diverse schools. Also, when variations were detected in the selection criteria investigated in this study, they usually were not associated with the race of the responding parents.

While the sample population assembled from the Renaissance School, highly educated and affluent, could easily be identified to support arguments about increased social polarization resulting from school choice, closer inspection and careful contemplation revealed something different. Even though variations detected in the selection criteria used by the Renaissance School parents did associate with levels of income and educational attainment, the selection criteria used by the upper income, more educated parents were the same selection criteria, generally, as those used by the remainder of the sample population. The differences detected resulted from the sorting; the relative emphasis and subsequent ranking upper income, highly educated parents placed on different aspects of educational quality as opposed to aspects of educational environment.

Parents from different socioeconomic and educational levels may choose different schools from one another. Any differentiation associated with school choice will not be the result of skimming that would occur if lower socioeconomic and less educated parents did not value educational excellence while parents of higher socioeconomic and educational levels identified and then placed their children in the best schools (Schneider et al., 1998). Differences emerged in the data evaluated from the Renaissance School because the parents sorted the selection criteria and through sorting, lower socioeconomic and less educated parents stressed a different set of values in education, and chose the Renaissance School because it also exhibited the fundamental and different dimensions of education that they viewed as important.

Another objection voiced by the critics of school choice was that school choice favored the more advantaged; those with the time and skills to work the system (Bastian, 1989). While school choice was not the exclusive domain of the advantaged at the Renaissance School, the affect of social class and the connected ability to work the system manifested in the data about the parents investigated in this study. If information was unavailable, choices unclear or resistance forthcoming regarding possible admission, parents from higher socioeconomic and educational levels compensated. One parent, upon hearing about a family transferring out of Montclair, commented, "I called Dr. Osnato and said, that's my slot." At times, even affluent and highly educated parents sometimes had no time

to work the system. However, through connections and networking, time became somewhat less of an impedance for those more advantaged parents.

The affect of social class and the resulting connections and networking skills used to maneuver through school choice, while certainly obvious in the more affluent, highly educated parents, manifested throughout other potions of the sample parent population selecting the Renaissance School. Evidence supporting that observation displayed in the marketing strategies many parents exhibited. Just as schools of choice market themselves to prospective parents, the data from this study indicated that applying parents, likewise, were marketing themselves in an attempt to gain admission to their school of choice. E-mailings to the principal, letters of intent from both the applying student and their parents were not uncommon communications as the days between filing the Freedom of Choice application and actual admission past. Fifth graders along with their parents often interviewed with the principal, spent the day visiting the school and attended the winter concerts, all to make themselves more visible and more likely candidates. Parents shared the details of their own careers hoping that their expertise would somehow be needed within the pool of parent volunteers supporting the Renaissance School. Parents denied admission after the first selection, often found themselves at the district's central office, exploring some method to secure admission. The extent to which these marketing strategies were effective in gaining admission was unclear and untested; what was evident was that parents were going to great lengths to gain admission to the school they had selected.

School choice as a policy was contingent on the competition it promoted (Yanofsky & Young, 1992). In three short years, the Renaissance School has fully realized that spirit of competition and was now over-subscribed. Comments from the focus group interviews depicted the frustration encountered by many parents who applied to the Renaissance School and experienced the competition. Controlled choice placed limits on admissions to individual schools within the goals of gender and racial balance, and that reality coupled with the small size of the Renaissance School, made competition for the seventy-five slots available each year quite intense.

In the first year of operation, the school district came to the district's parents in late April, after Freedom of Choice application were decided, and offered the new middle school choice for the upcoming school year. Approximately seventy parents changed their declarations and decided to come to the Renaissance School; so everyone applying got their school choice.

In the second year, circumstances changed; the Renaissance School developed a reputation, was available from the beginning of the selection process to all choosing parents, and applications far exceeded available slots. Again in the spring of 1999, the third year of operation, the Renaissance School was significantly oversubscribed by some eighty students.

One parent commented, "It's not hard, all you have to do is the math, you know not everyone is going to get in and I think that made some people not even try; they were much more willing to put down a choice they felt they would

receive." A father responded in focus group, "If you're a White male, there is competition to get in".

School choice extended with the opening of the Renaissance School has resulted in significant competition for available slots. Comments from parents who knew families denied admission indicated that at least for now, those families simply chose other schools, some public, some private. The alternative of private school was expensive, so temporarily, many parents who were denied admission tolerated the level of competition. Eventually though, the question becomes whether enough desirable slots will be available within the district's public schools. What seemed apparent was that some type of long range plan needed to be formed. This year, the fourth year of operation, again over-subscribed, the district changed the rules regarding preferences extended to siblings of Renaissance students. If the sibling was graduating in June of 2000, the family was no longer considered for sibling preference, a dramatic departure from the customary considerations extended to parents. That type of contingency plan will place the issue of competition in the forefront of community debate about school choice. The question also lingered about how many parents, sensing the level of competition, decided instead to select a "safe" school, one to which they would likely be admitted.

The harshest criticism alleges that school choice is predominately the domain of academically exceptional or economically privileged students whose families seek the semblance of a private school education at public expense (Chase,

1999). Viewpoints related by some Renaissance parents in focus group interviews were that unless your child was a genius, you need not apply; the program was too rigorous and the competition was too intense. But many parents chose the Renaissance School for very different reasons. While the evidence from this study certainly indicated that the Renaissance School encompassed a particularly motivated and involved parent population, one apparently highly educated and affluent, with children successfully participating in a rigorous, academic program, policies did not support nor encourage selective admissions. Furthermore, looking at a segment of the Renaissance School population with special needs, particularly the number of 504s fashioned since students were admitted to the Renaissance School, said somewhat emphatically that the Renaissance School was servicing a diverse, academic population.

Additionally, the responses from the Freedom of Choice forms provided substantiation for that observation. While the Freedom of Choice application furnished two small spaces to list selection criteria to corroborate the school choice selection, many parents, particularly since the first year Renaissance School opened, regularly attached two and three page letters reasoning their selection choice. Aside from the more typical explanations about selection criteria, many parents applying to the Renaissance School spoke about a special need regarding their child. In addition to the characteristic and recognized special needs, "chronic health issues", the "recent death of a mother from breast cancer", "the loss of a brother in a car accident this spring", "ADHD controlled somewhat by medication,

but he needs a small environment", "quiet and shy without any close friends" and "the size of the other two middle schools was traumatic", all identified the Renaissance School as the place best suited for their child considering immediate circumstances. The Renaissance School clearly provided a distinctive environment for those needing special support. The leadership of the school, specifically Dr. Anand's nurturing behavior and vision about each student, how they learn and how we judge that attainment, certainly supported arguments about the Renaissance School providing a supportive but not necessarily privileged educational environment.

Finally, critics of the marketplace models used to substantiated school choice said that parents chose schools for reasons other than effectiveness, the alleged non-instructional reasons (Alves, 1983). Typically listed in that criticism were school atmosphere, location and perceived school quality. The Renaissance School parents certainly used non-instructional selection criteria in their school choice decisions. The selection criteria related to educational environments were selection criteria important to those parents in selecting the best school for their child.

Researchers who equated educational excellence with effectiveness alone through market models missed the prominence certain non-instruction selection criteria encompassed. Chubb and Moe (1985,1990), mentioned several non-instructional criteria when they evaluated the organizational, structural and governance strategies resulting from successful school choice implementations.

Those non-instructional criteria, particularly small school size and the building of social capital, were judged beneficial as they related to school efficiency. In using non-instructional selection criteria to formulate school choice decisions, parents from the Renaissance School were announcing that the connected aspects of educational quality and educational excellence were equally important for their children when selecting the appropriate school.

School choice allowed parents to pick from varied options but additionally, school choice authorized schools to create individual interpretations of the educational experience. Researchers pointed out that we could not assume that the mainstream, sanctioned or even most popular school choices were always the best or even the most desired (Elmore & Fuller, 1996) Programs built about consonant educational instruction or themes revealed the most positive benefits. (Henig, 1995) The Renaissance School presented something of a paradox regarding that research. Many parents chose the Renaissance School because of the bold new interpretation presented. While the Renaissance School was built around a consonant theme, the perception about Renaissance School being the "hot" school, the place where the money would go, a place for certain risk-takers, may have been the attraction for some selecting parents.

Policymakers, in formulating the policies of school choice, built on the supposition that choice would serve as the catalyst for change to reform and improve schools (Elmore, 1990). The forecast about enhanced excellence was contingent on the competition that school choice promoted. If parents valued high

achievement, effectiveness or innovation and exercised school choice options toward achieving those ends, reform would result. Several of the Renaissance parents had other opinions concerning the consequences of school choice. They merited repeating:

> School choice forces you to constantly reassess your kid and exactly what you want for them. It forces you to become more attentive to what's going on....... There's a big sell out there, but it's more in the perception than the reality.

> It keeps us from falling back. One of the biggest benefits to school choice is that it keeps integration in the public discussion and prohibits us from becoming complacent about our values as a community.

> There's something about the whole process of choosing a school......getting into the school you selected forms a contract from the beginning. You are already where you want to be, so you don't start out fighting the system.

> Choice is good. It makes us a little crazy, but I think ultimately, it's a good thing. Maybe if everyone gets a chance at a hot school, it's like the carrot on the stick. We'll all just keep looking and trying and staying around long enough for high school.

Implications

While it was not the intent of this study to examine the effectiveness of school choice as a reform strategy, the examination of the Renaissance School parent community and the selection criteria they used in school choice decisions presented some implications.

1. If one accepts the marketplace model often associated with school choice policies, there is a need to listen to what parents say they want and need expressed through the school choices they make. School choice, viewed within the

marketplace model involving competition, will create winners and losers. If this concept has any accuracy, the winners will be the schools who meet the wants and needs of parents.

2. Even if the path of reform changes, and school choice fades into yet another configuration about reform, some of the organizational, structural and governance issues school choice tried to address may be avenues toward more effective schools. Small school size and the extension of the small caring community, designated as social capital, were the most promising strategies.

3. Considering the characteristics of small, caring communities, charter schools as an implementation of school choice have more promise than vouchers. Vouchers inevitably come with too much outside control, do not inherently build on social capital and research shows that even when subsidies are given, vouchers still tend to favor more advantaged families.

4. The whole notion about "fit" may be more mythical than we would like to believe. It takes experienced teachers long hours to tailor their instruction toward the needs of individual students. The prospect that parents know how their children learn seemed a bit over-stated. What we are probably saying is parents know what type of schools they want their children to attend. Parents are able to distinguish schools of varying qualities or environments and want to send their children to the schools that they perceive to be the best.

<u>Recommendations</u>

The purpose of this study was to identify and analyze the criteria employed by an identified suburban/urban population as they exercised extended options afforded through school choice toward admission of their children to a public middle school. The selection criteria used by the sample population displayed many collective components and at the same time reflected variations. Numerous, diverse and perhaps mutually related selection criteria determined school choice for the sample population.

The findings from this study suggested that the selection criteria used in school choice decisions were related to individual perceptions about educational quality and educational environment. Evidence also indicated that several, related selection criteria defined that perception of quality and environment, not a single selection criteria. The population examined used a diverse variety of selection criteria to determine educational quality and environment and when variations appeared, the differences were frequently a re-ordering of similar selection criteria. Variations also seemed more related to a parent's socioeconomic/educational level than to any racial identification. The unique context of the Montclair community and the Renaissance School affected the school choice decisions, the selection criteria formulated and the population examined was somewhat distinct.

If school choice is a catalyst for change to reform and improve schools, specific recommendations from this study need emphasis. The recommendations are divided into three sections. The first section is directed at administrators,

supervisors and leadership teams from Montclair, the second section suggested problems for additional research and the third section included recommendations specifically directed toward policymakers.

<u>For Montclair</u>

1. Parents in Montclair have many reasons for choosing a particular school. While they believed the designation of magnet themes, more fiction that fact, there were preferences as to perceived school environments. School size seems to be an over-riding determinate and while the district has longed pursued the notion of schools within a school through house configurations, more visionary implementations are needed.

2. While characterized by prior research as sophisticated, knowledgeable and skilled, there are some parents in Montclair who find it difficult if not impossible to fully benefit from the options choice provides. Departing from more traditional strategies like quotas, Montclair needs to identify and target under-served populations and then formalize a plan for informing those parents about the choices available. Recruitment in targeted areas might be another strategy to ensure school choice options extend to all.

3. The social class of a parent has direct impact on their ability to work the system. Even if time becomes a factor, affluent and highly educated parents have power through their connections and networking to still work the system. Some parents do not have those connections or networks. As an extension of the small caring community, leadership teams within schools need to discuss the factors

connected with school choice and social class. Barbara Strobert's (1991), study of choosing parents in Montclair, indicated that lower socioeconomic and less educated parents received most of their information about school choice by talking to others, particularly one another. Can school leadership teams, working in a professional capacity, build on that connection and actually assist parents in the development of networking skills?

4. Central administrators in the district must make quality schools throughout the district a consistent priority. Expansive vision and dynamic leadership are sorely needed. Long term plans, addressing systemic reform should characterize the design in direct contrast to the contingency approach now manifested.

5. Irrespective of all the whistles and bells, if the academic program or faculty in the Montclair Public Schools erodes, parents will be less satisfied with school choice as established. Staff members need more autonomy within their own buildings to create serious curriculum as opposed to constantly being asked to implement ready-made units or the latest hot topic from the district. Emerging leadership teams with visions and innovative ideas need encouragement and support. While expectations for students need to remain high, a rigorous curriculum cannot be the source of intimidation; nor can the recruitment process. Respect for individual differences and expectations expressed in terms of sequenced and obtainable goals can support those demands.

6. Planning and innovation within the district need to become ever vigilant against insidious forms of discrimination. School starting times as late as 9:30 a.m. eliminates an entire segment of the population from choosing that school.

For Future Study

1. This examination of parents and the selecting criteria they used in school choice decisions was limited by the selected research methodology and design. One recommendation for future study might be a longitudinal study of Montclair to determine how school choice proceeds over time. Innovations are short lived; they often die out, only to be replaced by the next "hot" idea. What factors regarding resiliency keep educational programs current yet consistent?

2. This study, not unlike many, had difficulty obtaining data from all segments of the population. The data obtained from this study, while useful and informative, added to a vast pool of research already available concerning the selecting criteria of more advantaged parent populations. Research inspecting only lower income, less educated parents might be a important addition to the knowledge base about school choice.

For Policymakers

1. Approaches to school reform need to be shaped by parents and practitioners more than policymakers. More of the problems schools face are connected to intangible issues than technical questions and crafted understanding becomes more essential than objective knowledge. Policymakers instead could look at issues like

economies of scale, and fashion plans that make it cost effective for schools to remain small.

2. Policymakers cannot continue to use race as an economic distinction. Instead of racial bean counting, schools should be allowed to become more diverse as the country becomes more diverse.

3. Along with providing a quality academic education for all students, public schools become the social seams which hold the fabric of our culture together. When policymakers decide what's best for education and implement new policies, they need to remember both functions.

Concluding Remarks

This study examined a parent population and the selection criteria they used to make school choice decisions. Understanding the selection criteria formulating school choice decisions was important because school choice as a reform policy viewed within a marketplace model was contingent on the competition school choice promoted. If parents valued academic excellence, effectiveness and innovation and use their options towards those ends, all schools would be forced to offer premium programs. Is that how the story goes? Sounds rational enough, except for the fact that the major activity within the model, choice, was actually a rather irrational activity.

If school choice were a rational activity, parents would begin their search or purchase of schools with a blank piece of paper, then proceed to jot down perceptions; what they saw, what they heard at all the schools they visited. They

would continue to evaluate the pros and the cons of their generated list, and finally arrive at a reasoned decision about school choice based exclusively on the data collected and evaluated about the researched schools.

But that's not precisely what happened. As with most anticipated purchases, parents as consumers, initiated the school choice search with a shopping list already quite filled; there may have been room for one or two more items but the shopping list was certainly not blank. Though not through cognizant design, the shopping list defined individual beliefs, values, needs and desires about educational excellence. Parents visited schools, went home, tried to eliminate any none essential items, made trade-offs, and came up with the best choice of schools for their child. School choice was basically an irrational process affirming and validating preconceived beliefs about what school should look like for their child. Selection criteria were substantiation for beliefs and values; social and educational. Selection criteria were not about the student, they more accurately reflected the parent.

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APPENDIX A

Solicitation Letter

RENAISSANCE MIDDLE SCHOOL
17 MUNN
MONTCLAIR, N. J. 07042

7 January 2000

Dear Renaissance Parent:

I write to you petitioning your assistance. I am a graduate student at Seton Hall University in the College of Education and Human Services, Department of Educational Administration and Supervision. For research to complete my dissertation at Seton Hall, I have selected to examine the Renaissance School.

Specifically, my research looks at who is choosing at the Renaissance School (demographic description), what criteria formulates that choice selection and how who is choosing and what criteria is used may associate. Additionally, I will take the data collected from the Renaissance investigation and compare it to other researched populations. Finally I want to see if typical speculations about the benefits and obstacles of extended school choice reported throughout the literature evidence at Renaissance or do other conclusions proceed from my investigation.

To assist me, please consider completing the enclosed <u>School Choice Study Survey</u>. Your decision to do this is of course totally voluntary and in no way connects with my contractual duties here at Renaissance. Do not sign the survey. The code in the upper right hand corner allows precise data entry without identity. In addition to the survey, the <u>Informed Consent Form</u> also enclosed requests permission to use confidential information about your student in my study. That material specifically includes: any free and reduced lunch participants, all MAT scores from 5th grade, any Special Education designations, STAR and 504 designations and the criteria listed on the Freedom of Choice document you filed when you selected Renaissance. If permission is granted, that data will likewise remain anonymous, identified only by code. If returned, the Informed Consent Form will have your signature and will be stored separately to avoid association with your data and thus ensure anonymity.

Any and all information you submit or consent to the use of will be treated anonymously and with strictest confidentiality. No individual data will appear in the eventual dissertation, only aggregate statistical summaries augmented with

tables. Again your decision to participate is voluntary and you can withdraw from participation without prejudice at any time.

A final data collection strategy I anticipate is an upcoming focus group. I would like to assemble that group to specifically expand on issues concerning school choice selection criteria. The session, with permission of the participants, will be audio taped, probably occur at night at the Renaissance School and a typed transcript will result for my data requirements. No identities will appear on the typed transcript only conversation labeled "moderator" or "respondent". Participation in the focus group is also voluntary and no identities of volunteering participants will disclose except to me, the moderator and the other volunteering participants. If you would like to volunteer to be part of that focus group, please indicate your willingness on the Informed Consent Form in the appropriate location.

Thank you for your attention to this request. Please contact me if you have questions or concerns. You are also free to contact my mentor, Dr. Anthony Colella at Seton Hall University (973-761-9397) should the need arise. Know also that Dr. Osnato and Dr. Anand are aware of the anticipated research and have given their consent and support to the endeavor.

If you decide to complete the <u>School Choice Study Survey</u> and the <u>Informed Consent Form</u>, an envelope is enclosed for your convenience. Please respond by January 15, 2000.

Sincerely,

Suzanne W. Dunshee
Renaissance School

"This project has been reviewed and approved by the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research. The IRB believes that the research procedures adequately safeguard the subject's privacy, welfare, civil liberties and rights. The Chairperson of the IRB may be reached through the Office of Grants and Research Services. The telephone number of the Office is (973) 275-2974."

APPENDIX B

School Choice Study Survey

Code _____

SCHOOL CHOICE STUDY SURVEY
Renaissance Middle School, Montclair N. J.
Academic Year 1999-2000

This survey is part of a study designed to determine who (demographic data) is choosing at the Renaissance School and what criteria formulate that selection. Your responses will be kept confidential and your participation by answering this survey is voluntary. The code in the upper right hand corner allows me to enter the data you submit on this form anonymously into a study data base. Eventually, all returned surveys will be destroyed.

In the event that two parent/guardians receive this form, please try, if possible, to respond in sum. Note any inability to do that.

Part I:

1. Gender of your child : ____ male ____ female

2. Which one of the following racial background categories best describes your child? (Categories are customary descriptions recorded in school documents. While they may not reflect racial background as you perceive it, try to choose the category that best fits) Record any concerns if necessary.

White ( )   Afro-American ( )   Other ( )

Hispanic ( )   Asian ( )

Concerns, if necessary

_____

_____

_____

3. 5th grade feeder school _____
If you entered Renaissance from a school outside the Montclair Public System,
please indicate name of school and town. _____

*The next two questions are optional but it would assist this study if you answer
them.

4. Check the last grade or highest level of educational attainment represented in
the household.

Some high school ( )   College graduate ( )

High School graduate ( )   Graduate degree ( )

Technical school or some college ( )

5. Please indicate which income range is closest to your total household income.

Less than $25,000 ( )

$25,000 - $49,999 ( )

$50,000 - $74,999 ( )

$75,000 - $99,999 ( )

$100,000 and over ( )

Part II:

Following is a table listing criteria used by some parents to decide which
school is best for their child when given school choice options. Rank the
importance of each of the following reasons for the school choice decision in the
table by checking whether each reason would be:
VERY Important,   Important   or NOT important   to you.

SOME CRITERIA USED TO MAKE SCHOOL CHOICE DECISIONS

	Very Important	Important	Not Important
Magnet school theme or program emphasis			
Overall perceived school quality			
What the word on the street is regarding this school			
Reputation of the school staff			
Location of the school			
Overall school building atmosphere			
Size of the student body			
Instructional approach (e. g. pedagogy -- is it structured class, hands on thematic, interdisciplinary, basis skills, etc.)			
Friends already attending or planning to attend school			
Siblings already attending school			
School reflects our family values			
Opportunities for parent involvement			

2. List any other important criteria you used in school choice selection that may not have been included in the preceding table.

_____

_____

3. Considering all the criteria listed in the preceding table and any criteria you may have added in response to question #2 above, what do you consider the single most important factor (criteria) that determined your school choice decision?

_____

_____

4. What do you consider the three best things about the school you selected for your child?

a._____

b._____

c._____

Please use the space below to comment on any added information or understanding you have about who is choosing at the Renaissance School and what criteria formulate that decision. Thank you!

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent Form

Code _____

Informed Consent Form

Re: Suzanne W. Dunshee, Doctoral Candidate
Seton Hall University, Research Data Collection
"Criteria Formulating School Choice Decisions for a Middle School Parent Population"
Mentor, Anthony J. Colella, Ph. D.   (w) 973-761-9397

The purpose of the dissertation mentioned above is to identify who is choosing at the Renaissance School, what criteria formulate that selection and whether patterns emerge between the choosing population and the criteria used. You have been identified as the study population for that research. If you elect participation, you will be part of the sample population.

If you elect to participate, your engagement will consist of all or any part of the following:

1. Responding to the School Choice Study Survey which asks demographic questions and queries your selection criteria pertaining to Renaissance School.

2. Giving permission for Suzanne W. Dunshee to access Renaissance and district documents to obtain the following information about your child if relevant:
   Free or reduced lunch participants
   5th Grade MAT scores
   Special Education designations
   STARS or 504 designations
   Criteria listed on Freedom of Choice document at time of filing

3. Participation in a Focus Group convened to explore school choice selection criteria in more depth. With permission of the participants, said focus group will be audio taped.

The survey should not take more than 30 minutes to complete and the focus group is expected to result in an evening meeting of about 90 minutes. The data solicited in #2 above requires no effort from you, only your consent.

I do not foresee any risks connected to the above solicited participation. The aggregate data collected from this study may benefit the Renaissance School.

This Informed Consent Form is presented to assure you that if you elect participation in all or any part of this study your identity will remain anonymous, your responses will be anonymous and confidential and any data obtained through records and documents about your child will be anonymous and confidential. Furthermore, your participation is totally voluntary and you may elect to withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice. Your participation or refusal also disassociates with any contractual obligations I have as an employee of the Montclair Public Schools.

No individual compensation will result from your participation, however a $100 donation to the Renaissance PTA has already been made on the study population's behalf by an anonymous donor.

Please feel free to contact Dr. Anand or me if you have questions or concerns. You may also contact my mentor at Seton Hall should the need arise.

"This project has been reviewed and approved by the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research. The IRB believes that the research procedures adequately safeguard the subject's privacy, welfare, civil liberties and rights. The Chairperson of the IRB may be reached through the Office of Grants and Research Services. The telephone number of the Office is (973) 275-2974.

I have read the material above, any questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity, realizing that I may withdraw without prejudice at any time."

_____   _____
Subject or Authorized Representative   Date

I give permission to Suzanne W. Dunshee to access confidential records mentioned in this form regarding my child. I understand that she will use any data obtained in confidence and provide anonymity. Yes _____ No _____

_____
Signature

I would like to volunteer for participation in the focus group looking at selection criteria. If chosen, I understand that I will be given further information about that convening. I understand that my participation in said focus group is voluntary and that my participation and any data collected will be treated with strict confidentiality. Yes _____ No _____

_____
Signature

Suzanne W. Dunshee 973-509-5741 Renaissance School

APPENDIX D

Focus Group Questions

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Participating in the intended focus group is voluntary and you may withdraw from participating at any time. You were selected to participate in this group after reviewing a list of volunteers with Dr. Anand. During the focus group, please avoid use of any words that would identify yourself, other participants or any Renaissance students. With your permission, this session will be audio recorded. Afterwards, a typed transcript of the entire session will be assembled. Should any words of identity present in audio recording, they will be deleted from the typed transcript. The transcript will be included in my dissertation as data presentation.

The intent of this focus group is solely to clarify and expand information about school choice selection criteria. Your participation in the focus group, apart from others participating, the moderator and the researcher, is anonymous. Any data from said focus group is aggregate information and will also be treated with the strictest of confidence. The audio tape and original transcript will eventually be destroyed.

Opening question:

Why is school choice important?

Introductory questions:

What has been your experiences with school choice either in Montclair or elsewhere?

How did those experiences impact on your ideas about school choice?

Transition questions:

What were you looking for when you made the choice to come to the Renaissance School?

What was the most critical element in relation to that search?

How did what you know about your child factor into the decision to select Renaissance?

Key questions:

Now that you have been at the Renaissance School for a period of time, how like or unlike is the school compared to your expectations?

What did you expect of the school?

How were your expectations realized or did you feel unfulfilled?

How alike or different is the school from your expectations?

In what regards?

Ending questions:

What would you change about school choice?

What would make it work better?

Thank you!

APPENDIX E

Request to Conduct Study

Suzanne W. Dunshee
1 Sherman Ave.
Summit, N. J. 07901-1926
Phone: 908-273-0915

26 December 1999

Dr. Michael Osnato, Superintendent
Montclair Public Schools
22 Valley Road
Montclair, N. J.   07042

Dear Dr. Osnato:

As partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctorate of Education at Seton Hall University, I am required to conduct and then write a dissertation study. I have reached that point in my graduate studies.

I write to you now to request permission to conduct that study as it involves the Renaissance School, a selected parent population from that school and documents from the Renaissance School and the district itself. Implicit in asking permission to conduct said study is also permission to access and use Renaissance and district documents and needed archival records.

The intent, if permission is forthcoming from you, is to carry on said research for approximately the next two months on my own time and at my own expense. The subjects asked to participate in the study either in part or total will be informed that their participation is voluntary, that their identities and any data about or from them will remain anonymous and that they may withdraw from participation at any time. Also it will be stated that their participation or refusal to participate totally disassociates from any contractual responsibilities they expect from me as an employee of the Montclair Public Schools. Furthermore, they will be told that I will command no benefit or advantage of employment nor financial remuneration from the Montclair Public Schools as a result of completion of this study or as a result of this study's outcomes.

The study, at this point entitled, "Criteria Formulating School Choice Decisions for a Middle School Parent Population," seeks to describe the population (through demographic information) choosing Renaissance School, identify their choice selection criteria and look for any evidenced patterns between who is choosing and the utilized selection criteria using SPSS crosstabulations. The study expects to then compare the data evidenced from the Renaissance

School to data reported in the researched literature base about other choosing populations. That inspection specifically will look at how those choosing at Renaissance compare to other researched populations and whether the conjectures about school choice implementations and interventions elsewhere reported evidence in the data obtained and manipulated from Renaissance School.

Methods for obtaining data for this study are: survey, focus group and inspection of archival records and documents at the Renaissance School and within the district. Specific details about said data collection and handling were detailed in the IRB (Institutional Review Board) application. Should you need additional or explanatory information as to my intent and proceeding with regard to data collection and management, please contact me. I have conditional approval from the IRB at this date and by the first of the year will have their final approval to conduct my research.

Dr. Anand is well aware of my endeavors, has been and I am sure will continue to be a constant consult in this venture. Attached also is the title page for my dissertation, where you will see identified my mentor, Anthony Colella, and other dissertation committee members. Please feel free to contact Dr. Colella 973-761-9397 (W) or 732-681-7290 (H) should the need arise.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this forthcoming endeavor for me with you and I will await your quick response to this request. Aggregate data as a result of this study will of course be available to you if requested.

Sincerely,

Suzanne W. Dunshee
6th Grade Science Teacher, Renaissance Middle School