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# A Descriptive Study of the Factors Influencing Middle School Choice in a Diverse Magnet School District in Northern New Jersey

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A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF THE FACTORS INFLUENCING MIDDLE SCHOOL  
CHOICE IN A DIVERSE MAGNET SCHOOL DISTRICT IN NORTHERN NEW  
JERSEY

BY

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## DEDICATION

To my wife – Debbie

Thank you for all your support, encouragement and love during this process. I could not have done it without you.

To my children – Madeline, Louis, Frank and Abigail

What the mind can conceive and the heart can believe...you can achieve

To my parents – Louis and Lucille

For getting it all started.

## ABSTRACT

### A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF THE FACTORS INFLUENCING MIDDLE SCHOOL CHOICE IN A DIVERSE MAGNET SCHOOL DISTRICT IN NORTHERN NEW JERSEY

Since their creation over two centuries ago, public schools have been coupled with students via geographical zones. Bolstered by compulsory attendance laws, public schools have a very consistent clientele. Based solely on where they resided, students were required to attend specific schools between Kindergarten and Grade 12. Schools have, in essence, a monopoly. Like all monopolies, they developed and operated quite inefficiently, especially when contrasted with their counterparts in the highly competitive, non-monopoly, for-profit business world. In the latter environment, companies that operate incompetently and wastefully find themselves out of customers and soon thereafter out of business altogether. With public school zones and compulsory attendance laws, public schools are guaranteed a steady supply of customers. In recent years, this business model has come under scrutiny from parents attempting to reform the system from within.

This study attempts to look at a unique K-12 school district in Northern New Jersey. The Montclair Public Schools is distinctive due to the magnet nature of the public schools and levels of socio-economic and ethnic diversity found in the township. Parents and students have the option of attending any one of seven elementary schools and three

middle schools in town. Integrating both qualitative and quantitative elements, the researcher surveyed the parents of students as they exited the Grade Five Magnet Elementary Schools and attempted to select from one of the three public Magnet Middle Schools. The Survey of Middle School Choice attempted to interpret the decision-making process and isolate key factors influencing this decision. Quantitative components included Multi-Choice Elements as well as Likert-Type Responses. Frequency statistics, mean scores, t-tests, analyses of variance and Post Hoc Tests were used to determine significance. Qualitative elements included Open-Ended Responses and provided the respondents an opportunity to elaborate on specific components of the middle school choice process. These responses were transcribed and analyzed for key terms and phrases.

The findings reveal that the single greatest factor influencing parents' school choice is the *quality of the teaching staff*. This factor cuts across all racial, gender and socio-economic groupings and is affirmed within each of these subgroups. Additional but secondary factors include *magnet theme*, *quality of the administration* and the overall *perception of the school*.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	Page ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
CHAPTER 1: THE PROBLEM AND PROCEDURES.....	1
• Purpose of the Study.....	3
• Statement of the Problem.....	4
• Theoretical Rationale.....	8
• Research Questions.....	12
• Limitations and Delimitations of the Study.....	12
• Organization of the Study.....	15
• Definition of Terms.....	17
• Chapter Summary.....	20
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	21
• Middle School Values.....	22
• The Development of the Middle School.....	29
• Magnet School Philosophy.....	32
• School Choice.....	37
• Parental Choice.....	46
• Chapter Summary.....	47
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY.....	49
• Setting – The Township of Montclair, New Jersey.....	49
• Setting – The Montclair Public Schools.....	51
• History of Controlled Choice.....	52
• Magnet Elementary Schools.....	56
• Magnet Middle Schools.....	58
• Population and Sample.....	61
• Instrumentation.....	62

• Reliability Analysis.....	63
• Data Collection.....	64
• Data Analysis.....	65
• Chapter Summary.....	65
CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION OF DATA.....	67
• Introduction.....	67
• Description of the Participants.....	68
1. Gender.....	71
2. Ethnic Code.....	72
3. Socio-Economic Status.....	74
4. Middle School Choice.....	77
• Summary of Data.....	84
1. Research Question One.....	84
2. Research Question Two.....	86
3. Research Question Three.....	90
4. Research Question Four.....	93
• Chapter Summary.....	94
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	96
• Purpose of the Study – Summary.....	96
• Theoretical Rationale – Summary.....	97
• Research Methodology – Summary.....	99
• Implications of the Study – Summary.....	100
• Summary of the Findings - Research Questions.....	101
1. Research Question One.....	102
2. Research Question Two.....	102
3. Research Question Three.....	103
4. Research Question Four.....	103
• Conclusion – Discussion and Implications.....	104
• Recommendations.....	107
1. Implications for Practice.....	107
2. Implications for Policy.....	108
3. Future Research.....	109
REFERENCES.....	112
APPENDICES.....	122



- A: Reliability of Analysis.....123
- B: Letters of Approval..... 125
- C: Letter of Solicitation.....127
- D: Survey of Middle School Choice..... 130
- E: Transcribed Open-Ended Responses..... 136
- F: Additional Non-Significant Statistical Data..... 158

Chapter I  
INTRODUCTION

“Choice creates competition; competition creates excellence.”

- Milton Friedman

In one succinct, yet compelling thought, the late Nobel laureate economist Milton Friedman has captured the goals, objectives, motives and passions of the school choice movement in America today. Limited parental choice leads to a situation where there is neither internal nor external competition between and amongst schools (St. John & Ridenour, 2001). Choice proponents argue, not unconvincingly, that market forces will improve education through the mechanics of competition – the schools that best satisfy the demands of parents and students will attract clientele (students) and prosper and those that do not will close (Smith & Meier, 1995). Fortunately for beneficiaries of school choice programs, accountability is installed directly into the system. This chapter will state the problem, define key terms and provide a theoretical base of understanding behind key issues.

Schools that tender programs and produce exceptional results that meet the demands of parents will survive, whereas schools that are unable to do so will fall by the wayside, casualties of the competitive marketplace (McCluskey, 2005; Holcombe, 2005). Moreover, the current method of enrolling students according to residence, affords the government a monopoly within the field of education, and according to economist Thomas Sowell (2002), monopolies, whether they are operated by the government or by private enterprises, are the enemy of efficiency. Competition, on the other hand, is the foe of inefficiency; it breeds efficacy. It is therefore theorized that competition and the fluid dynamics of a competitive marketplace will amalgamate their collective efforts to produce a more efficient, imaginative, resourceful and cost-effective organization (Glen, 1991).

Increasing the amount of competition in the education marketplace, it is hypothesized, will do what various local, state and federal government programs, oversight committees, sub-committees and ad hoc committees have been unable to do for decades – namely increase the effectiveness, cost-efficiency and productivity of the American public schools (Robenstine, 2000). Advocates for school choice programs argue that such programs offer children directly, their parents indirectly, and the general taxpayer obliquely a way to benefit from the vigorous effects of healthy competition. “A school choice system...would go a long way toward providing the competition necessary to introduce accountability and quality into American education” (Williams, 2007).

American public schools today function eerily similarly to the way they operated a century ago, when they were organized in an Industrial Age model, complete with assembly line vestiges (Abbott, 1995; Slavin & Rifkin, 1996; Egol, 1999). A massive number of students would move from room to room and teachers would “fill them” with education (Holden, 1994).

The phrases ‘multiple intelligence’, ‘brain-based instruction’, ‘cooperative learning’ or ‘differentiated instruction’, had not yet been defined or studied, and were certainly not part of the professional development activities at that time. Researchers such as Gardner, Hunter, Dewey and Maslow had not yet developed their respective spheres of influence in academia.

In the Information Age however, new paradigms exist and more is being demanded from students as they compete in what has been termed the “global economy” (Charp, 1995). Information – where to find it and how to use it – has become the treasured currency of this new economy. The challenges and problems facing schools as they attempt to meet the demands of the new economy is, at once, simple yet exigent. ‘Boxing the compass’ for 13 years of formal schooling is no longer an option for schools and students alike. “What’s wrong with parents having the right...to enroll their children in schools of their choice?” (Williams, 2007).

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify the pertinent factors affecting parental middle school choice in a diverse K-12 New Jersey school district with magnet schools and an intra-district controlled choice program. Existing research indicates a ‘schism’ when looking at factors affecting school choice from a parent’s point of view. Some parents choose schools based primarily on academic reasons – test scores, class size, curriculum offerings, whereas others choose schools more for the non-academic indicators such as proximity, transportation or social environment (Hausman & Goldring, 2000). Obfuscating this scenario are the parents who, of course, take all these considerations into account concurrently.

School choice researchers such as Raywid (1991), indicate that parents are generally more satisfied with their chosen school than their assigned school for three primary reasons: 1. Parents are simply content to have the *option* to choose; 2. It is assumed that parents choose schools based on a utility value theory and that, like all consumers, they make choices based on their own self-interest, or in this case the interest of their child; and 3. Parents, once they make their choice, feel a need to justify their decision and reveal symptoms of increased fulfillment (rose-colored glasses) after the fact. Regardless of the reasoning, school choice appears to be an issue that is deserving of continuing research.

This study is designed to reveal the important variables involved in parents' choice decisions for middle school and use that knowledge base to concomitantly improve the quality of the schools. Accordingly, educators need to identify factors that draw parents to a specific school and/or push parents away from a particular school. Once these pertinent variables are identified, the problem morphs into an administrative one. Namely, how can school leaders and stakeholders use this information to create superior schools that are in high demand?

### Statement of the Problem

The problem is to determine how and why parents, when provided the opportunity, select specific schools and do not select other schools. This research was designed to identify particular variables, primary and secondary, that parents make use of, and refer to during the choice process. Complicating the situation is that public schools in America more often than not operate in a low-competitive environment (McCluskey, 2005). Unlike in the for-profit business world, where ineffectual companies lag behind and eventually fail, schools are not pressured to

build and develop competent and effective programs to the same degree. “School choice creates pressure on the inferior schools, which must either become acceptable or go out of business. This pressure is, in fact one of the primary benefits resulting from the institution of universal choice” (Glenn, 1991).

In recent years, there have already been some factors - internal as well as external – that have injected levels of competition into the public school environment, both in New Jersey, as well as nationwide. The 2002 Supreme Court decision in *Zelman* has served as a catalyst for the emergence of vouchers nationally. Moreover, the marked increase in the number of charter schools in recent years is also linked to the effort to increase levels of competition in the public sector. A recent survey indicated that charter schools have increased from one in 1992, to 3940 just fifteen years later (Consoletti & Allen, 2007). That same survey revealed that these charter schools serve over 1.16 million students in 40 states and Washington D.C. In fact, since the mid-1990s, when many states passed charter laws, charter schools have experienced double digit percentage growth each year (Consoletti & Allen, 2007).

Emblematic of the challenges educators face in the twenty-first century is the fact that our school system was organized during the Industrial Age and now must serve students in the Post-Industrial or Information Age (Abbott, 1995; Slavin & Rifkin, 1996; Egol, 1999). The concerns and issues of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century have very little in common with affairs in present-day America.

Schools must find a way to meet and exceed the demands and concerns of parents and prepare their children to compete in the competitive workforce of the coming century (Charp, 1995). The challenge is therefore simple and straightforward; improve the quality of education that children receive in the public sector. According to the National Center for Education

Statistics, the percentage of students attending public schools in America holds steady year-to-year at roughly 90%. This makes it necessary for education reformers to target their efforts first within the public sector, where there is more opportunity to affect profound change and have a decided impact on academic achievement.

The theory behind school choice is simple; rely on yet unleashed market forces to create a competitive environment (Coulson, 2005). “Schools must move away from the outmoded industrial model to a service-industry model. We must define our business as an organization that provides the service of learning. And in any service industry, customers expect the job to be completed” (Holden, 1994). Parents as consumers or buyers of education services want the best for their children and know what is in their best interests, perhaps more so than schools do.

The history of school choice, although extremely topical, does not appear to be as avant-garde as one might expect. American patriot, founding father and sometimes political gadfly, Thomas Paine (1791), first proposed a voucher system running concurrently with, and containing parental choice options to augment and strengthen compulsory public education over two centuries ago (Keefe et al., 2002). Economist Milton Friedman, in 1955, proposed providing parents with vouchers in an attempt to inject the monopolized education system in America with some much needed competition. Although the document is 53 years old, Friedman’s pioneering spirit in *The Role of Government in Education* is still considered a clarion call for education reform.

Market-based choices, according to Harrison (2005), represent the easiest and most uncomplicated way to fix many of the problems afflicting public education, because most of these troubles are inherent in all government provisions involving all government agencies/departments. These evils are intrinsic due to the fact that public schools, as a quasi-

governmental agency, use the political process rather than the economic process to solve problems (Harrison, 2005). In short, schools are often guilty of misallocating resources and not operating with any sense of urgency or efficiency when solving problems.

More recently the Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation (2005) has been working to "...build upon this vision, clarify its meaning to the general public and amplify the national call for true education reform through school choice." Parents seem to want school choice programs, whether in the form of vouchers, inter-district choice, intra-district choice or charter schools. Proponents claim that education markets are more efficient, academically effective, and responsive to the demands of families than state-run school monopolies (Coulson, 2005). There is, of course, little evidence to contradict that claim.

Distilled down to its essence, school choice proponents are eager to separate government *financing* of public education - which they wish to keep - from the government *administration* of public education - which they believe to be inefficient, asphyxiated from too much red tape and bureaucracy (Friedman Foundation, 2005). This particular model of public education would therefore shift from funding *schools* to funding *students* (McCluskey, 2005). Government funding would follow the student, if he/she were to transfer between schools.

Public opinion on government administration of education seems to warrant further discourse on the topic of choice, as a 1998 poll by Quinnipiac University indicates that only 37% of New Jersey residents believe that parents should have to send their children to the schools assigned by the local school board. That same poll revealed that 62% of New Jersey residents believe that either; parents should have the right to send their children to a public school of their choice (21%), or receive a voucher (41%) to send their children to a school of their choosing.



A more recent (2004) Friedman Foundation poll, conducted by independent research firm Wirthlin Worldwide, found that school choice support has reached record levels of 64%. Other anecdotal evidence suggests that in an era where consumers have more power and choices than ever (Coke or Pepsi, Comcast or Verizon, Ford or Toyota, etc.), people resist and reject the concept that they have no choice options when it comes to the education of their children. It is quite evident that the most important thing to parents is their children. To expect parents to have little or no influence in those two areas is not in the public's best interest, nor is it practical. The 'pushback' school officials are now feeling from parents can certainly no longer be classified as token resistance.

### Theoretical Rationale

The theoretical rationale for this study is simple and straightforward. Parents know their child's strengths and weaknesses better than do the public schools; parents can identify and categorize a school as being below average, average or above average; and parents, if provided the opportunity, will always select the best possible school for their children. According to Harrison (2005), parents know their child best, care the most for that child, and will ultimately bear the cost of any bad decisions.

Public schools currently benefit organizationally, economically and politically, from the protection they are awarded as the sole public provider of an essential service. They are, in short, the only game in town. With a growing number of people finally comprehending that what is in the best interest of the public schools' establishment (teacher unions, local boards of education, state and federal departments of education, etc.) might not necessarily be in the best

interests of the students they serve, the issue of school choice has emerged as fundamental to efforts to improve education in this country.

According to 2004 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projections, manufacturing positions are expected to continue their sharp decline until at least 2012. With the advent of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 and its cousin, the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) in 2005, a great deal of low and semi-skilled jobs have moved overseas, both to Central America as well as to Asia, as foreign labor markets prove themselves to be more efficient investments for American companies. In sum, the safety net that low and semi-skilled manufacturing jobs have represented for the past century no longer exists in present-day and future America. Today's students are tomorrow's employees, and they will be likely working in highly skilled professions. The need for a superior education has never been more indispensable than at the current moment.

“Undergirding all these changes is society's transition from an industrial economy to an information economy, where one's value is determined more by one's ability to access and utilize information (knowledge) versus one's ability to produce a specific product” (Simpson, 1997). Schools must mirror these changes if they are to succeed in the coming years. Standardized test scores and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), in addition to becoming part of our everyday lexicon, are large measures of whether or not schools are able to meet the demands of a changing civilization. In addition, parent satisfaction is likewise a growing concern of school administrators (Hoerr, 1989). Typically, and also logically, parents who choose their child's schools are extremely satisfied with their choice, as well as remarkably involved with their child's schooling (Hausman & Goldring, 2000).

School choice has emerged in this environment as a stand-alone solution because it is able to wholly transform the educational landscape from a bureaucratic institution to a system controlled by the consumer (McCluskey, 2005). Failure to make this transition will undoubtedly lead to a situation where the pangs and cries for education reform find a political voice which, in turn, decimates the public education system as we currently know it. As a new epoch in education is launched - the era of choice - public schools will have a critical and fundamental role in improving the quality of schooling our children receive. Schools that are “ahead of the curve” recognize this fact and will conclusively develop programs designed to meet the changing and challenging demands of their stakeholders. Teachers, administrators, parents and students want to know if the schools of the future will decide matters based on the exacting requirements of consumers in a market setting, or through government pronouncements made via the political process (Harrison, 2005).

In this study, the researcher will study the issue of school choice in a K-12 magnet school district in a suburban setting in Northern New Jersey. Specifically, what are the driving forces behind school choice at the grassroots level? Also, special consideration will be paid to factors considered important by parents/caregivers when selecting these schools of choice. If the researcher can identify factors important to parents/caregivers, then those same factors can be replicated and used within other schools in the same district, as well as exported to other school districts across the state and country.

In this study, the researcher will assume that the parents/caregivers selecting the school will opt for the one which maximizes their reward (utility value theory). If students are not *assigned* to a specific school, but rather their parents *choose* a particular school, then what is implicit in this exchange is that parents may be more likely to be satisfied with their selection, as

it is voluntary. In other words, the researcher will assume that parents have their children's best interests at heart more so than does the education officialdom. Americans, it is alleged, may often seek and pay for expert advice, but take exception to "expert orders" (Walberg, 2000). As Thomas Paine (1796) once wrote, "The government is best that governs least."

Without the "price signals" that are evident in the business world indicating the level of satisfaction, the government very often does not know whether or not it has been able to provide a quality education. Standardized test scores, administered more frequently in recent years, provide a snapshot and do, in fact, provide somewhat credible evidence of the quality of the schooling received, but nonetheless do not measure any other ancillary factors (fine and performing arts, safety issues, customer service, school culture, etc.) that go into whether schools are providing what families want (Harrison, 2005).

Recent federal legislation – *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) – posits that when a school is deficient in one or more categories on an annual test, the "cure" according to the federal government involves more bureaucracy and additional layers of government oversight (McCluskey, 2005). This management involves, "setting standards for reading, math and science and requires that students take tests assessing their knowledge against those standards. That necessitates that bureaucracy be augmented; standards must be designed and disseminated, and tests must be written, administered and graded." As America's 40<sup>th</sup> President once said, "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are, 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.'"

"NCLB also imposes new teacher qualification standards, requires that states seek out and approve organizations to provide tutoring to struggling children" (McCluskey 2005). In many ways, the cure seems worse than the disease. School choice, of course, removes redundant

and sluggish elements of the civil service from the decision-making process and empowers parents to assess the state of affairs and make a determination about what is truly in the best interests of their children.

### Research Questions

1. What is the primary factor affecting middle school choice as made by fifth grade parents/caregivers before their children enter sixth grade at one of three magnet middle schools in a diverse K-12 public school district in Northern New Jersey?
2. What are other factors affecting middle school choice as made by fifth grade parents/caregivers before their children enter sixth grade at one of three magnet middle schools in a diverse K-12 public school district in Northern New Jersey?
3. How is the middle school choice decision affected by the respondent's ethno-racial background?
4. How is the middle school choice decision affected by the respondent's socio-economic level?

### Limitations and De-Limitations of the Study

This study is both quantitative as well as qualitative in nature, and is limited by the sample size (N=114) of parents/caregivers who had children in the fifth grade in one of six public elementary schools in Montclair, New Jersey for the school year 2006-07. As of October 15, 2006, the total grade five enrollment in the Montclair Public Schools for school year 2006-07

was 522 students. The researcher used the *Table of Random Numbers* (SPSS 14.0) to randomly select 250 parents for participation in this study. As per Witte and Witte (2001), the *Table of Random Numbers* allows each person the same chance - “*a truly random sample*” - of being selected for the survey, an important feature to limit potential researcher bias.

The selected parents come from a variety of backgrounds, and each has brought to the study a different set of core beliefs, values, mores and expectations. Potential bias or limited objectivity of the respondents might be a concern. Furthermore, this study is limited by the concept of self-selection. By its very nature, this study relies exclusively on the parents voluntarily completing the survey.

Additionally, many of these students attended the Montclair Public Schools since kindergarten, whereas others moved into the district, from non-public schools or other public school districts at some point between kindergarten and the second half of fifth grade, when this survey was administered. Possible differences between “native Montclairians” (those attending Montclair Public Schools since kindergarten) and those new to the district were not considered nor controlled for within this study. Moreover, in a township as diverse as Montclair, it is possible for a child of one ethnic background to be raised by parents of a different background. In the demographics section of the survey, respondents are asked to provide an ethnic code of the child being registered for middle school. This study does not control for parents of a different ethnic background filling out the survey versus parents of the same background.

This study is also limited by the survey instrument, which had been successfully used in a school choice study at the kindergarten level in the Montclair Public Schools, and re-designed by the researcher to determine which factors affect choice decisions at the middle school level. The survey has already been validated. This survey instrument will be both quantitative as well as

qualitative in nature, and respondents will be asked to commit to answering both short answer questions on a multi-choice element, as well as on a Likert-type scale in addition to four open-ended inquiries. Specific phrases such as, *Quality of the Teaching Staff*, *Quality of the Administration* or *Nurturing Culture* were intentionally left undefined and may be interpreted differently by different subjects. The study is further de-limited by the fact that only the six elementary schools which house fifth grade students and the three public magnet middle schools located in Montclair, New Jersey were considered for this analysis.

In addition to these concerns, an additional limitation emerges from the survey implementation. The researcher decided to use Seton Hall University's ASSET (Academic Survey System and Evaluation Tool) software to conduct the survey. ASSET software allows the researcher to position the survey online and provide potential respondents with a web address to complete the survey. Observably, this leads to the limitation connected to the so-called digital divide. To participate in this study, a subject would need to have computer hardware, internet access and the technology skills and confidence necessary to venture out into cyberspace and complete this survey. It is probable that the self-selected sample size of 114 represents a subset of tech-savvy people, which in itself is a limitation. There was no option of completing the survey on paper.

Moreover, this study is limited by the fact that the researcher serves as the Principal of Glenfield Visual and Performing Arts Magnet Middle School, one of the three Magnet Middle Schools in the Montclair Public Schools. Promoted from his previous position as Assistant Principal of Hillside Gifted and Talented Magnet Elementary School in July, 2006, the researcher has a professional relationship with some of the subjects in this survey. The researcher, while in the capacity of building principal, also participated in many of the open-

house events as well as different orientation meetings with parents, school staff and Central Office Administrative Personnel.

The researcher's involvement with the subjects, although noteworthy, does not represent potential bias. No outcomes were pre-determined. The participants in the study remained anonymous throughout the research process. Participation, or non-participation, was completely voluntary; subjects could withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice. All data from this study is reported anonymously, or in aggregate form, without attribution to any individual.

### Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized into five chapters: Chapter I consists of the statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions/hypothesis, definition of terms, theoretical rationale, limitations and delimitations of the study and significance of the study as it pertains to factors affecting middle school choice in a diverse K-12 district.

Chapter II presents the literature review on the subject of factors affecting middle school choice in a diverse K-12 magnet school district. An examination of the national middle school movement (away from junior high schools) will be presented, as well as an analysis of core middle school values. Chapter II will also present a historical analysis of the concept of the magnet schools. Also, the researcher will discuss and explore the relatively new concept of school choice and analyze how it is affecting the American education establishment from both an economic perspective, as well as a political one. Special emphasis will be placed on the unique qualifiers (grade configuration, curriculum offerings, flexible scheduling, advisory programs, etc.) which make up a typical middle school.



The literature review will also examine recent research related to the field of academic achievement in what is being termed the “age of accountability.” Overlaid against the backdrop of *No Child Left Behind*, schools find themselves under more scrutiny than ever. Parents and other constituent groups seem to have developed an insatiable appetite for school testing data, economic and budgetary efficiency and transparency, as well as administrative accountability. The literature review will observe how schools are responding to this pressure and examine what type of programs they have developed, implemented and evaluated. The literature review will also compare and contrast the similarities and differences between the classic “subject-centered” middle school and the more modern “student-centered” middle school.

In Chapter III, the researcher frames the methods, subjects and people who make up this dissertation. Chapter III also includes the survey used to gauge factors affecting parental decision-making regarding their children as they enter middle school. This survey is intended to determine what factor(s) are most important to parents/caregivers as they select a middle school for their graduating grade five student. Also included in Chapter III is a concise history of Montclair Township, as well as the Montclair Public Schools and a chronicle of their controlled choice movement, dating back to the court cases, both local and national, that initiated and hastened the formation of a magnet school district of choice. Special attention will be paid to the different magnet themes of each of the sending elementary schools; the distinct magnet themes of each of the receiving middle schools, as well as the procedures undertaken by parents as they enroll their children in one of the three magnet middle schools. Reports, correspondences and abstracts emanating from the district will also be included. These will serve to “paint a backdrop” upon which the middle school controlled choice movement sits in Montclair. Extensive demographic data will be culled from the most recent census to further provide

background information specific to Montclair Township in general, and the Montclair Public Schools in particular.

Chapter IV introduces the information harvested from this survey. The data was analyzed and tested for significance, and open-ended questions were transcribed and searched for noteworthy trends and developments. The data was presented and all four research questions answered in greater depth.

In Chapter V, the researcher discusses the findings from this report and connects them to the literature review found earlier in the study. The researcher will also include recommendations for further studies to more efficiently enable future researchers to mine this field for additional data and search and identify more extensive trends. Moreover, the researcher will include policy implications, as well as implications for practice.

## Definition of Terms

### *Competitive Marketplace*

In this study, competitive marketplace refers to the means by which buyers (parents/children) and sellers (schools) carry out voluntary exchanges (Bilas, 1971; McEachern, 1994). Traditionally, a market was a physical location, but in this study, it will refer to a set of beliefs and ideas that make up the how, when and where parents and their children select magnet middle schools.

### *Magnet School*

In this study, magnet schools will refer to public schools that provide an alternative to the mandatory assignment of children to schools (Chapa, 1998). Magnet schools provide parents a choice among several schools that offer specialized curricular themes or instructional methods (Steel & Levine, 1994). Magnet schools gained popularity in the 1970s when policymakers were designing desegregation plans in an effort to make them more attractive to parents, educators and students (Cocchiarella, 1991). Magnet schools were established to promote racial diversity, improve standards, and provide a range of programs to satisfy individual talents (Goldring & Smrekar, 2002).

#### *Middle School Open House*

In this study, middle school open house refers to daily tours held at each magnet middle school during the day and also at night, where parents/caregivers and children can visit each middle school and meet with varied school personnel (administration, teachers, and support staff) to determine relative strengths and weaknesses of each school, as well as compatibility and comfort level with each school (Montclair Board of Education, 2006). Open houses have emerged as a way for schools to exhibit improvement in order to attract students who might otherwise flee to private or other public schools (Barrett, 1993).

#### *Middle School Orientation*

In this study, middle school orientation refers to an information-sharing meeting held for the benefit of all Grade Five parents/caregivers which initiates the choice process (Montclair Board of Education, 2006). Each of the magnet middle school principals makes a presentation detailing distinct aspects of their respective middle schools. Magnet themes are explored in

detail, and parents are able to compare and contrast similarities and differences between each of the three middle schools and ask probing questions to further extricate information to assist the decision-making process.

### *Neighborhood School*

In this study, the term neighborhood school refers to schools that exclusively serve students in a particular geographic area, usually proximate to the school. Generally, considered to be the first option for most parents, the neighborhood school serves the locality however homogenous or diverse that particular vicinity is (Hassel & Ayscue, 2004). Each public school district sets up its own rules and boundaries for every school in the district.

### *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)*

NCLB is a comprehensive reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. This landmark bi-partisan legislation redefined the federal government's role in public education and is organized around four core precepts: increased accountability, expanded choice options, increased flexibility/local control, and a focused highlighting of proven teaching methods (Scherer, 2006).

### *School Choice*

In this study, school choice will refer to giving parents the right to choose the schools their children attend (Blast, Walberg, & Genetski, 1996; Walberg, 2000; Robenstine 2000). Although there are comprehensive plans which enable parents to choose *private* as well as *public* options, for the sake of this research study, school choice (controlled choice) refers to intra-

district choice options of one of the three magnet middle schools in the selected district (Montclair Board of Education, 2006).

### *Vouchers*

In this study, vouchers refer to programs allowing all parents, regardless of income, place of residence, or any other criteria to receive funds directly from the government to be used for their children's education (Friedman, 2004). Funding is no longer directed from the government to the school district, but rather redirected from the government to the parents, who in turn send the money to the school (Peterson, 2003). Public funding of schools remains consistent, though a bit more circuitous (Metcalf & Legan, 2002).

### Chapter Summary

This chapter is designed to provide the concise statement of the problem; namely that public schools are organized structurally to have no natural competition (McCluskey, 2005). Other than costly private schools, parents have very few options other than to send their children to the local public neighborhood school. Without the competition found in other surroundings, schools often lack the need to operate effectively as well as efficiently. Moreover, unlike businesses that exist in these more competitive environments, schools are not forced to stare down the same potential loss of customers. Additionally, this chapter presented a theoretical rationale for implementing school choice programs in an effort to enhance middle school performance. Identifying factors that influence parents when selecting a magnet middle school is the primary goal of this study.

## Chapter II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

“Competition is valuable only because, and so far as, its results are unpredictable and on the whole different from those which anyone has, or could have, deliberately aimed at.”

The purpose of this chapter is to supply a current analysis of the literature related to school choice, especially at the middle school level. The purpose of this study is to analyze which factor(s) parents take into consideration when choosing middle schools for their children. An extensive literature review of this subject reveals middle schools, magnet schools and school choice to be quite topical, especially since passing of the landmark, bi-partisan 2002 *No Child Left Behind* legislation.

Although there are currently magnet schools at all different levels of public education today - elementary, middle and high schools - the researcher has chosen to focus this study on the middle level, as it is the bridge that connects the elementary school with the secondary school; the primary school with the comprehensive high school. The focus of the literature review will be to examine four major constructs: middle school values, the development of the middle school, magnet school philosophy and school choice.

## Middle School Values

“Successful middle schools promote family involvement and take the initiative to develop needed home-school bonds. The involvement of the family is linked to higher levels of student achievement and improved student behavior.”

- National Middle School Association, 2007

The group of students currently in middle school are, “...five years removed from their teddy bears and five years away from college. They are the tweens” (Scherer, 2006). Kohn (1996) has portrayed these students to be, “...active meaning- makers, testing out theories and trying to make sense of themselves and the world around them.” Simultaneously, middle school students are both self-confident as well as insecure. This duality perplexes middle level educators and makes these ‘in-between’ years that much more critical.

According to Clark and Clark (1994), middle level schools have matured through the years and cultivated a specific core set of features that differentiate themselves from elementary schools, as well as from high schools. These features include, but are not limited to: personalized instruction, interdisciplinary units of curriculum and flexible scheduling (McEwin, Greene, & Jenkins, 2001). The National Middle School Association (2003) reiterates this point as well. Their association presumes that the middle school curriculum is not only challenging, but also integrative and exploratory; that assessment should promote varied learning approaches and the organizational structure is elastic enough to support a student-centered climate. Student-

centered middle schools appear to use this approach to take into consideration differences in student aptitude, skills and preferences or learning styles (Grant & Branch, 2005).

*Turning Points* (2006), a comprehensive education reform model focused on improving student learning, states on its website that all middle school graduates should be able to: think creatively, identify and solve complex and meaningful problems, know their passions, strengths and challenges, communicate with and work well with others, lead healthy lives and be ethical and caring citizens of a diverse world. According to the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989), this stage of adolescence is the “turning point” between childhood and adulthood. Furthermore, the quality of education received during these years is integral to the systemic improvement of the American education establishment.

The creation of a smaller learning unit within a larger school is also common practice in many middle schools. In fact, middle schools that are prearranged around the concept of the team-teaching approach achieve more; they have superior student attendance and fewer disciplinary problems than middle schools that do not use the team or house approach (Pounder, 1998). Moreover, middle schools generally use this team approach to, “integrate subjects into broader themes” (Scales, 1993). Middle schools also, “engage students in problem solving through a variety of relevant **experiential** (boldface in original) learning opportunities” (National Middle School Association, 1995). The theoretical foundation for experiential learning dates as far back as Dewey (1938) and Vygotsky (1962). The next generation of researchers (Grant & Branch, 2005) has “scaffolded” this knowledge base to provide a more modern approach better known as project-based learning.

Echoing this point is Schukar (1997), who believes that at the heart of the middle school philosophy is the idea that curriculum should be organized to “transcend” separate subject



matters. In other words, although middle schools are structured to have different subjects taught by assorted teachers, there should be some commonality linking these areas of the curriculum, as well as some of the instructional pedagogies. The curriculum is aligned both horizontally as well as vertically, and instructional methodologies are varied to best reach all learning styles. The use of “teaming” was found to be beneficial to adolescent development, as well as to high achievement scores (McEwin, Greene, & Jenkins, 2001). Interestingly enough, all three of the public middle schools in Montclair are structured around the concept of team teaching. Two of the three (Mount Hebron and Glenfield) also utilize “looping,” the concept of keeping students and teachers together for the entire three years they are in middle school.

The National Middle School Association (2003), believes that flourishing middle schools are characterized by a culture that includes: educators who value working with young adolescents, courageous and collaborative leadership, a shared vision that guides decisions, a safe and supportive environment, high expectations from the entire learning community, students and teachers engaged in active learning, an adult advocate for every child, school-family-community partnerships, relevant curriculum, multiple learning and teaching approaches, assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning, an organizational structure that endorses meaningful relationships and learning, school-wide efforts that foster health and wellness and multifaceted guidance and support services.

The middle school movement - and it is just that - a movement, sprang from the belief that adolescents need to learn in student-centered environments and not subject-centered environments (Kanthak, 1996). Additionally, more recent developments underscore that a student-centered approach to teaching and learning focuses its efforts on variables such as student aptitude, skills and preferences (Grant & Maribe, 2005). Early organizers of this

movement and their benefactors began crystallizing their thoughts and hardening their resolve when they began looking at the fact that children were maturing - physically, emotionally and socially - earlier than ever before (Lewis, 1992). The swiftness of these changes makes reforming middle school education that much more urgent.

The social-emotional aspect of middle level education seems anecdotally, as well as empirically, to be more problematic and intricate than in previous generations. Thorny issues involving drugs, sex and the internet have amplified the usual middle school issues of low self-esteem and peer pressure, making those years more arduous for children as well as educators. Lynskey and Hall (2000) connected the use of marijuana with low grades and a general dissatisfaction with school. Additionally, Diego et al. (2003) were able to link the use of marijuana, cigarettes and alcohol with low grades. All of this is occurring at a time when children are less sure of themselves than every before. "Terms such as 'frightened', 'alone', and 'out of touch' are commonly used to describe the feelings of early adolescents" (Pollack, 1995). Simmons and Blythe (1987) coined the term, "cumulation of stress" to point out the different challenges to the students' sense of equilibrium during the middle school years.

One of the primary ambitions for middle schools is to construct learning opportunities that are student-centered, yet endow students with the responsibility for learning (Schukar, 1997). Pollack (1995) goes further to claim that middle schools represent, "safe, special places" for adolescents, and should be emphasizing student success and positive self-concept. Thusly middle school philosophy supports the reasoning that the amount of student learning present in a given school is directly related to the quality of the learning environment (Schmidt, 2004). The more appropriate the atmosphere of the school, the more likely genuine student achievement will be taking place. Jonassen and Grabowski (1993) have identified four crucial elements that must

be present for middle school learning to take place: the student must be willing to learn, the student must be able to learn, the environment must foster learning and the instruction must be effective.

Cooney, Moore and Bottoms (2002) refer to a “guidance gap” and discuss in their findings that high achieving middle graders have greater access to guidance faculty members than do low achievers. This advisory process is consistently mentioned in various blueprints for middle school reform. In addition to advisories, middle school students also seek out and benefit from strong parental support, as it is a foundation of stability in their otherwise tumultuous lives (Renihan & Renihan, 1995).

High-achieving middle schools are assembled on the twin notions that if curriculum is meaningful in some way to students then they can learn on a high level (Kanthak, 1996). Schukar (1997) goes on to claim that learning, in a middle school, needs to be authentic and students need to exhibit opportunities to identify with educational outcomes – “rub elbows with the real world.” Kolodner et al. (2003) reiterate this concept with further research detailing the need for students to learn complex cognitive, social and communication skills to develop “habits of mind” when they are still in middle school. Moreover, topical research indicates that in high-achieving middle schools, the instructional leader sets lofty standards for staff, students as well as parents (Cooney, Moore, & Bottoms, 2002). Very often, the lead administrator is the “principal” teacher in the building.

In stark contrast to the junior high model, middle schools do not simply prepare adolescents for high school by giving them an inappropriate dose of the high school experience (Hough, 1995). A study of middle level schools in North Carolina found that schools rated as “exemplary” by the state are more likely to have a building-level culture that reflects this middle

school philosophy (McEwin, Greene, & Jenkins, 2001). Moreover, Schmitt (2004) has stated that learning in a middle school is “inextricably interwoven” into the framework of an “active learning environment.”

Teachers in high-achieving middle schools were also more likely to report that their principals consulted with them and supported the staff in their push for higher student standards (Cooney, Moore, & Bottoms, 2002). Quite simply, there is ample research indicating that students in the middle grades learn competently when this “middle school philosophy” is adhered to. Kanthak (1996) has studied the differences between average middle schools and high-achieving middle schools, and found that often the difference is that high-achieving middle schools, in addition to emphasizing district curriculum guides and state regulations, also focus their efforts on the communal anxieties of adolescents thus making their time in school more productive. These students are, paradoxically confident and unsure of themselves, dependable and irresponsible and always predictably unpredictable (Atwell, 1989).

Methodologies such as reading and writing workshops (Atwell, 1989), exploratory courses (Merenbloom, 1988) and interdisciplinary team teaching (Erb & Doda, 1989; Wallis et. al, 2005) all conspire to inject individualized instruction into these middle schools. These components as well as others, i.e. advisory programs (MacIver, 1990), gradually ease the transition from elementary to secondary education. Middle School students also benefit from pedagogical approaches more innovative than simple lectures (Swaim, 2005).

Operating concurrently with these initiatives is the debate being held in many middle schools on whether or not they should block-schedule their students. According to Mowen and Mowen (2004), block-scheduling can ease the transitions from the “homelike atmosphere” of the elementary schools to the more departmentalized milieu of secondary schools. Specifically,

block-scheduling diminishes the need for unremitting class transitions (which can impede unorganized students) and can increase content emphasis and time on task (Mowen & Mowen, 2004).

The middle school movement has “brought into sharp focus” the differences between elementary and secondary education in this country (Alexander, 1984). These dissimilarities show themselves most vividly when discussing the focal point of the teaching and learning process; whether it will be a child-centered or subject-based process. Successful middle schools are able to transition students away from the child-centered milieu in the elementary schools towards a more curriculum-centered atmosphere more commonly associated with secondary schooling.

Critics of the modern middle schools however, paint an altogether different picture of these schools. Parent advocacy and stakeholder groups have charged that middle schools, at the expense of academic achievement, focus too much on the social and emotional aspect of the children they serve (Beane, 1999; Roney et al., 2004). According to Norton (2000), middle schools have done a better job at improving the emotional and social support networks at school than they have at strengthening the academic core of the middle school. In other words, although various reform movements have noted the need for academic reform as well as counseling enhancements, middle schools have focused more of their efforts on the latter and less on the former. Bradley (1998) has gone even further, “...the middle school model has come under attack for supplanting academic rigor with a focus on students’ social, emotional and physical needs.”

Middle schools, it is alleged, have not done their students any favors by eliminating practices such as the honor roll (Bandlow, 2001). These and other achievement-based

distinctions, are becoming more rare, and cooperation seems to be prized more so than competition and individual accomplishments. These critics seem to believe that excellence has emerged as less important when compared to issues of equity and that students, at a most curious age, are given too much latitude to solely pursue areas of interest at the expense of a challenging academic course load. Moreover, it is alleged that these students often arrive in high schools woefully unprepared for any meaningful level of schooling (Bandlow, 2001). Cheri Pierson Yecke (2005), former Education Commissioner in Minnesota parroted this concept by revealing the “precipitous decline” in academic achievement found in at the middle level and hinting that the cause may very well be a, “disproportionate regard for student self-esteem”.

### The Development of the Middle School

“You don’t have to suffer to be a poet. Adolescence is enough suffering for anyone.”

- John Ciardi

The middle school movement emerged when educators began to hypothesize that traditional junior high schools had become too curriculum-centered and developed cultures that were neither student-friendly nor child-centered. Quite often, these junior highs were organized similarly to senior high schools. Differences in student age, ability level and maturity level, if not completely ignored, were at least not focused upon (Hough, 1995). Critics also maintain that the pendulum has oscillated too far in the opposite direction and many middle schools have now become too student-centered and not focused enough on achievement-centered goals (Kanthak,

1996). In short, middle school curriculum and pedagogies have remained “contested territory” between the two opposing philosophies (San Antonio, 2006).

This duality of the middle schools - focusing on the subject as well as serving the student - has caused a great deal of consternation for many schools. Elmore and McLaughlin (1988) have submitted that American education reform is cyclical and this reform has long fluctuated between these two forces. They claim that the subject-centered movement has its research base as far back as the Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato. The need to define the learning objectives and organize the curriculum separates this approach from a more modern student-centered approach. This method traces its roots back to French firebrand Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and believes that the child becomes the primary source of the curriculum, taking into strong consideration the differences within and between each child. According to M. Hayes Mizell of the Clark Foundation, these two roles should complement, not oppose each other. High achieving middle schools, it is assumed, are able to balance these functions and make them interdependent, each one lifting up the other. Additionally, Glenn (1991) mentions that both of these reforms are, “...in the final analysis external to the classroom encounter between teachers and pupil.”

Dovetailing neatly with these and other criticisms is that fact that curriculum in the modern American school has been described as, “a mile wide and an inch deep” (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, 1998). American middle schools, it is suspected, emphasize breadth at the expense of depth. TIMSS data revealed that American textbooks often surpass 400 pages, whereas textbooks in Japan and Germany (international leaders in math and science) are rarely one-half that size. These smaller textbooks allow teachers to focus on as few as five topics annually, while mass-marketed American textbooks compel teachers to teach

upwards of 65 different topics, averaging out to almost two topics per week, and certainly not enough for a thorough understanding of that topic.

Still there have been others who altogether blame the middle school structure as the problem, and oppose efforts to reform the system as it is presently constituted. These reformers wish for school districts to return to a more traditional bi-level (K-8, 9-12) arrangement as opposed to the more modern three-tiered approach (K-5, 6-8, 9-12). Effective instruction for a twelve year old is dissimilar to successful instruction for both eight years olds, as well as for sixteen-year-old children (Wormeli, 2006). Accordingly, middle school educators need to develop their own unique set of skills and proficiencies. Reformers such as Ruth Mitchell (2000) believe that middle schools retard the intellectual progress students make in the primary grades and effectively preclude many students from ever being ready for college. She cites two major reasons for this: the misguided conviction that adolescents are too “hormonal” and the fact that many middle school teachers lack the subject matter knowledge to teach higher order thinking skills in these selected areas. In Missouri, approximately 40% of that state’s K-8 schools received “distinction in performance” awards on the statewide test. In Philadelphia, test scores for fifth grade students were higher in both reading and math for those students in K-8 schools as opposed to those on the more modern K-5/6-8 track.

M. Hayes Mizell, again of the Clark Foundation, believes that the argument should focus less on the grade configuration and more on standards-based instruction. Indeed, Hough (1995) argues that there is no national consensus on appropriate grade spans for the middle grades and that grade spans themselves are not as indicative of a district’s philosophy as its programs, policies and practices are. In fact, as the baby boomers were replaced by the much smaller Generation X, district’s enrollments shifted lower in the early 1980s and middle schools became



the swing schools. Consequently, many districts changed the grade configuration to fit in with changing enrollment data and patterns (Lewis, 1991). Thusly, there is no national consensus on the best arrangement of grades in a middle school. Nancy Ames, President of the Education Development Center in Newton, Massachusetts deduces that, "It's not about the grade span but what goes on in the classroom. You should look at what goes on inside the school and try to make it better, whichever grade configuration you have."

Common to all these criticisms is the empirical data given to further emphasize their point. Identifying and using the trends found in the landmark 1998 TIMSS study and the annual National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), detractors of the middle school point to the ineffectual performance on these tests by American students in middle level schools. In addition, comparisons are made, negatively, to foreign countries regarding both the quality of lessons taught in American middle schools as well as the quantity of instructional time.

In summary, the development of the modern middle school in America is still very much under construction. There are many factors (quality teachers and administrators, proven teaching methodologies, and top-flight facilities) that all middle level educators can agree on. However, there is still debate, heated at times, regarding specific features of the modern American middle school. The longstanding deliberations about whether the primary focus should be *student-centered* or *subject-centered* have yet to be resolved and, it would appear to this observer that they will not be settled any time soon.

### Magnet School Philosophy

"The magnet school movement in which students and parents are permitted to select the focus of the educational program is a choice offered by some districts

as they attempt to meet their students' diverse needs”

- Alyce Hunter

Magnet schools have been defined as public schools that provide an alternative to mandatory assignment of children to schools (Cocchiarella, 1991). They provide parents a choice among several schools that offer specialized curricular themes or instructional methods, and were established to promote racial diversity, improve standards, and provide a range of programs to satisfy individual talents (Goldring & Smrekar, 2002). According to Hausman and Brown (2002), magnet schools are characterized by four traits:

1. A unique method of instruction (i.e. Montessori).
2. Admissions procedures that facilitate desegregation efforts.
3. Choice options for families.
4. Access for students across neighborhood attendance precincts.

Although researchers such as Doyle and Levine (1983) contend that the Boston Latin School founded in 1635 was the nation's first true magnet school, most educators agree that magnet schools are a relatively new phenomenon. The term magnet gained popularity in the 1970s when policymakers were designing desegregation plans in an effort to make them more attractive to parents, educators and students (Cocchiarella, 1991). Magnet schools were further aided and abetted in 1976 when Congress passed an amendment to the Emergency School Aid Act and expressly earmarked money to be used on magnet schools/programs to further promote desegregation. This supplementary money allowed many districts to begin to plan and implement magnet-themed schools in their respective districts (Blank et al., 1983).

Described by Peebles (1982) as, "...having a distinctive program of study designed to attract a cross-section of students from all racial groups voluntarily," magnet schools have been around for over thirty years. Originally used to complement busing policies, magnet schools seem to have replaced busing as the primary tool to achieve racial integration of schools (Metz, 1992; Rossell, 1990). Many magnet schools now are primarily recognized for their inimitable academic programs and commendable accomplishments (McAuliffe-Straus, 2004). These programs offer parents and students alternative educational programs and are designed principally to increase student learning and achievement (Steel & Levine, 1994).

Occasionally and, oftentimes, harshly criticized for "skimming" the highest achieving students away from their, often poor, neighborhood schools, magnet schools are considered a part of the school choice movement and are lauded by many as a wondrous example of bottom-up reform (Neild, 2004). These schools are characterized by the fact that they generally serve students from diverse and wide-ranging geographical areas and depend on voluntary - not compulsory - enrollment (Blank, 1984). This open enrollment often involves children willingly crossing neighborhood attendance zones to attend public magnet schools (Maddaus, 1988).

Supporters of school choice in general, and magnet schools in particular, point to aggressive amounts of evidence linking levels of individual choice to increases in quality of life. Specifically, they compare South Korea to North Korea, Taiwan to China, Puerto Rico to Cuba, and in each example, the citizens in the country with more choice options, freedom and increased levels of self-determination and independence, enjoy enhanced standards of living (Walberg, 2000).

Magnet middle schools attempt to marry the twin models of middle level education with magnet schools (Desiderio, 1996). More recently, the magnet school movement has since

morphed into a political chameleon with significant and surprising levels of bi-partisan support. Liberals promote the further integration of the nation's public schools that surely (when demographically possible) will result from magnet schools. Magnet schools, vouchers and school choice have replaced busing as the primary vehicle for the integration of the American public schools. Undeniably, school choice has originated from the civil rights movement and now serves as the primary apparatus to assist in the desegregation of schools (Keefe et al., 2002).

Kenneth Clark, the sociologist who testified in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education*, argued that segregation is harmful, even when it is not forced upon the powerless by the powerful (McAuliffe-Strauss, 2004). Although public schools in America are no longer segregated by law (*de jure* segregation), many schools in the nation are considered *de-facto* segregated because of entrenched housing patterns. This "bottom-up" magnet school reform is typified by administrators, teachers and parents becoming empowered to affect substantive change in their schools and communities.

Conservatives, on the other hand, advertise the prosperous effects that result from incorporating competitive forces into the public school systems. This argument is simple – that the free market can improve public education through systemic implementation of competitive forces. When the mechanics of competition are fully unleashed, the schools that best and most frequently satisfy the demands of parents and students will attract clientele and prosper, and those that do not will be compelled to discontinue operations (Smith & Meier, 1994). Additionally, research indicates that conventional schools do make reasonable attempts to innovate and improve when faced with the bleak prospect of losing students via the choice process (Greene, 2001; Hess, Maranto, & Milliman, 1999). It seems in this instance that politics

intermixed with education reform certainly makes for incongruous allies, if not predictable results.

It is commonly agreed upon in our society that the parents should own the principal role in the raising of their children (Keefe et al., 2002). The magnet school reform movement is distinguished by the concept of empowerment - of the parents as well as of the school - as they attempt to respond to the predilections of their constituents (Goldring & Smrekar, 2002; Perkins et al., 2003). The quality of these magnet schools is established and maintained by market forces. Schools that meet or exceed clients' demands will stay in business, whereas schools that do not will undoubtedly cease to function (Robenstine, 2000). Regardless of the reason - incompetence, malfeasance, or wastefulness - schools that fail to deliver the quality of instruction that the parents wish for will undoubtedly close (McCluskey, 2005).

To gain, or at least maintain "market share," schools would have to be responsive to demand and develop innovative curricular offerings (Robenstine, 2000). School districts that do not offer choice are said to enjoy a monopoly over their constituents. These entrenched and static interests wish to persuade legislators to write laws to exclude new market entrants and deter competition (Walberg, 2000). Lessening the number of available choices for parents and students will indisputably diminish the competitive pressures on the remaining schools (McCluskey, 2005; St. John & Ridenour, 2001).

Continuing with this line of thinking, if parents (consumers) are not satisfied with their assigned neighborhood school, and if they have the financial ability to do so, then they will take their business elsewhere (Coulson, 2005). That the school choice movement has amongst its leaders and benefactors, many economists, is not by accident. One such individual, Thomas Sowell, bluntly states that he does not have, "*faith* in the market, but rather *evidence* about the

market” (Sobran, 1981). In short, if these reformers are able to implement their proposed modifications, the education marketplace in the future will more resemble other, more competitive marketplaces, and ultimately the consumer (parents and children) benefits (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Coulson, 2005).

### School Choice

“Underlying most arguments against the free market is a lack of belief in freedom itself.”

- Milton Friedman

The modern-day school choice movement aggressively captures and conveniently appeals to two powerful and dynamic forces in American history - capitalism and freedom. America was founded on the belief that competition is healthy and robust for any industry and, more importantly, for the consumer (Harrison, 2005). Our economy, among the strongest in the world, has emerged as such largely due to the invigorating consequences of competition. “The market-based approach relies on choice and competition to increase incentives to perform, improve and change” (Finn & Kanstoroom, 2000).

The Darwinian nature of the marketplace in such a system demands that companies produce what the consumer wants at a price they are willing to pay (Le Grand, 2003). Low-performing schools would quickly develop into low enrollment schools and the financial consequences for these schools would be quite acute (Robenstine, 2000). Without the assurances of a steady enrollment, currently supplied by compulsory attendance laws, schools would be

obliged to make their facilities and curriculum offerings consistently palatable to parents so they could continue to draw students in to their school. In short, strong ideas and companies survive and weaker, more anemic ones do not.

Public education has long enjoyed monopoly protection from the refreshing and challenging effects of competition, and many parents - not to mention taxpayers with no children in the school system - quite simply have had a bellyful of this situation. Stated more succinctly, the consumer wants each student to receive the most thorough and challenging education at the least possible cost to the taxpayer (Robenstine, 2000). Competition, although not a panacea, is considered a necessary component to any systemic school improvement plan (Coulson, 2005; Harrison, 2005). Moreover, the school choice movement believes that there is no “one-size fits all” possibility to schooling, nor is there a universal “best” school model (Raham, 1998).

According to Hill (1999), school choice both excites and enflames passions around the country. It is expressed in diverse appearances, yet defined in exclusive terms that paint either a positive or negative portrait (Raham, 1998). Proponents believe that choice will account for improved school productivity and increase the opportunities for low-income families to access high-quality education (Hill, 1999; Hausman & Brown, 2002). According to Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas (2002), “While the romanticized ideal of universal public education resonates with the cognoscenti who oppose vouchers, poor urban families just want the best education for their children, who will certainly need it to function in our high-tech and advanced society.”

Mann (1990) believes that these market forces will “squeeze” schools and compel them to either provide enhanced educational experiences, or simply go away. Moreover, school choice utterly revolutionizes how education is delivered; transforming it from a system controlled by the

government to one controlled by the consumer (McCluskey, 2005). Opponents suppose that school choice plans will further stratify our society along class-lines (Hill, 1999), or set in opposition different schools from the same school district (Howe et al., 2002).

Operating concurrently alongside this emerging school choice movement is the fact that American citizens enjoy a long and storied history of personal liberties and individual freedoms embedded in the Constitution and dating as far back as 1215 with the signing of the Magna Carta by King John at Runnymede, just outside of London. The school choice movement taps into these passions, and promises parents an opportunity to benefit from freedoms and liberties in the two areas they are most zealous about - their children's education and their money. On average, parents who are able to involve themselves in the school choice process have a tendency to be actively engaged in their children's education; a positive development (Goldring & Shapira, 1993; Hausman & Goldring, 2000).

In addition to amplified levels of parent's involvement, research indicates that parent satisfaction increased when school choice programs were implemented in Milwaukee (Witte, 1996) and San Antonio (Martinez, Godwin, & Kermerer, 1996). Moreover, it appears that parents able to exercise school choice options are more likely to be dedicated to improving the culture of the school (Hirschman, 1990). According to Comer and Poussaint (1992), Lynn (1997) and Mapp (1997), family involvement in education is correlated with student academic achievement and other propitious educational outcomes.

Once parents have a vested interest in their school of choice, they develop an appetite for participating in, and influencing school decisions in a manner consistent with high academic achievement (Hausman & Goldring, 2000). These parents, once engaged in this process "buy in" to the new school of choice, and in addition to continuing in the role of advocates for their



children, also become supporters of the new school (Harris-Brown, 2000). According to Seeley (1984), when an individual selects a school from among multiple alternatives, the individual's commitment to the chosen school becomes more passionate. When parents actively choose a specific approach to learning, both the particular school and the individual student have improved their chances for academic success (Raham, 1998).

A report issued in 1999 by the Connecticut Parenting Resource indicates that active parental involvement is linked with positive school outcomes such as improved student morale, attitudes and academic achievement. Similarly, the Child Trends Databank released a report that same year which specified that functional parental involvement has been found to decrease so-called at-risk behaviors such as teen sex, violence and drug usage. Other researchers have been more direct; "The closer the parent is to the education of the child, the greater the impact on child development and educational achievement" (Kasting, 1994). Additional research hints that parental involvement at the middle school level has greater impact than comparable involvement at the high school level (Epstein, 1985). Teachers and school administrators need to tap into this wellspring of support. It is a simple and cost-effective way to drive the school improvement process.

On the surface, at least, it would appear that many parents, as consumers of education, are enjoying the increased opportunities to choose their children's schools (Harris-Brown, 2000; Patterson, 2001). These occasions dovetail neatly with other choice opportunities present in people's lives. As consumers, parents have many more choices and seem more likely than ever to demand similar chances to contribute to their child's education (Henig, 1999; Raham, 1998). In short, if schools are not able to deliver accountability, the public will compel it to do so

(Mann, 1990). According to Raham (1998), “There has never been a time in history of public education when parents have been so prepared to control the destiny of their child’s education.”

For choice programs to be effective, parents must be able to choose between schools that are distinctive, coherent and reliable (Hill, 1999). Distinctive schools differ from others in a meaningful way and offer parents tangible alternatives to other schools. Coherent schools are defined by Hill (1999) as having shared values and goals. Reliable schools are extremely consistent over a great period of time. Magnet schools’ most fervent supporters would claim that the choice element present in these schools is what makes them shine academically with the students, and socially with the parents and stakeholders in the community at large (Hunter, 1994).

Wells (1990) maintains that if parents are able to select schools, they would avoid the worst schools and select the school that best matches the child’s individualized needs (utility value theory). This concept is novel, as it creates no new levels of government bureaucracy and requires very little governmental oversight. Parents will select the best schools for their children out of their own self-interest; schools will be motivated by the very same rationale. Due to the fact that the money follows the student, schools will be compellingly induced to differentiate themselves, in a positive way, from their competitors (Snell, 2006).

It would appear to most unbiased observers that school choice is a movement gaining strength at the grassroots level across the nation (Patterson, 2001). The increase of Charter Schools (Harris-Brown, 2000), Educational Vouchers (Metcalf & Legan, 2002), Home-Schooled children (Gryphon & Meyer, 2003), all components of the national school choice movement, lead us to believe just that. These liberties or courtesies, once provided to parents, will become entitlements and like all government entitlements, will prove themselves to be quite difficult to

eliminate. Proponents of school choice emphasize that it is the one reform model that allows poor people the same degree or level of educational freedom that the middle and upper class currently enjoy (Howe et al., 2002). In addition to changing how education is delivered to children, school choice transforms the role of the parent. This transformation turns parents from passive observers to more hands-on participants.

Although it has been reported (Ash, 2007) that both “successful” charter schools as well as “underperforming” charter schools make significant gains in student achievement over time; it has also been reported that, in one study, 60% of charter schools lag behind their traditional public school counterparts. Moreover, a re-analysis of the 2003 NAEP scores finds charter schools trailing public schools in both reading and math, by more than originally thought (Robelen, 2006). These findings were also corroborated by 2005 NAEP scores, in which charter schools’ test scores trailed public schools once again. According to Larry Feinberg, Assistant Director for Reporting and Analysis, National Assessment Governing Board, “Charter schools generally are about the same or slightly worse than the regular public schools” (Desoff, 2006). Even the investigative arm of Congress has gotten involved, claiming that more oversight is needed to better assess the impact of charter schools. A GAO (Government Accountability Office) report concludes that studies are needed to better assess how student achievement is affected by charter schools as well as how efficiently charter schools utilize their money (Hendrie, 2005). Looking at charter schools through the narrow lens of student achievement, the early results are decidedly mixed.

The overarching theory behind this study is an economic one, referred to by some researchers as the *utility value theory* and by others as the *rational choice theory* (Walberg, 2000). In these transactions, both parties make rational choices and believe that they are getting

the better, or at least the equal of the deal. An individual who voluntarily buys milk from the corner grocer deems the gallon of milk to be more important than the \$3.00. At the same time, the corner grocer considers the \$3.00 to be more vital than the gallon of milk. Each party to the transaction is satisfied and believes that they received a “good” portion of the exchange. As the barter was voluntary (a good-good exchange), it can be assumed that both parties are inherently satisfied with the transaction.

Successful school choice plans all contain the element of choice, the most basic component of the “rational choice theory.” With the concept of choice present, it can be assumed that parents are happy with their chosen school because, like the individual who buys a gallon of milk, the choice was made voluntarily. With neighborhood schools, the ingredient of choice is simply not present and there is no way of empirically studying which schools are meeting the wants and needs of the community (Robenstine, 2000). Without the opportunity to remove themselves from the public schools, parents must suffer the double indignity of having their children remain in a facility they believe to be unproductive, or being required to pay for an, often expensive, private school in addition to paying their schools taxes.

School choice theorists value individual choice more so than governmental “expert” decision-making (Walberg, 2000). Moreover, when deciding on a school for their progeny, parents are demanding the opportunity to be provided with educational plans containing elements of parental choice. Summarized by rational choice theory patriarch, Adam Smith, (1776) “Every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way.” Moreover, there is a strong research base which supposes that if school improvement plans introduce elements of parental choice then the introduction of market forces will not lag too far behind (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Glenn, 1991). Accordingly, once these

competitive forces are introduced, schools will undoubtedly display marked improvement due precisely to this acute pressure (St. John & Ridenour, 2001).

School choice advocates have made it very clear that they believe excessive government control over the industry stifles both competition and innovation (Hill, 1999; Robenstine, 2000). They point to differences between government/quasi-governmental organizations and non-government operated businesses. Recent examples of government waste and inefficiency were viewable during the September, 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster in the Gulf Coast region. Multiple reports (Murphy, 2005; Sowell, 2005; Williams, 2005), have Wal-Mart utilizing their own weather prediction/tracking equipment and rushing emergency supplies (food, water, generators, etc.) to New Orleans days before Katrina (then only a tropical depression) reached the Gulf Coast. They were not the only private business with the foresight to do so. Federal Express was able to hurry over 100 tons of disaster supplies, and State Farm Insurance sent thousands of extra agents to the area to expedite claims (Sowell, 2005). As this was occurring, there were reports of the federal government, "...delaying firefighters two days in Atlanta hotels to receive sexual-harassment training and watch videos on the history of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) while people were dying in New Orleans" (Murphy, 2005). All this while parts of the city lay under water and the Louisiana Superdome resembled a scene from a third world triage.

Emerging from this dire situation was a scenario where the private companies - under extreme competitive duress to turn a profit, avoid a loss and develop positive public relations - performed far more efficiently than did their public counterparts, who were under no similar stress to turn a profit, avoid a loss or improve their public relations image. The reasoning is quite simple; without any competition, the public monopoly - FEMA or public schools - is able to

perform more wastefully and inefficiently when compared to the private sector. “Government,” Thomas Paine (1796) once wrote, “even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one.”

Absent of any meaningful competition during this crisis, FEMA feebly emerged as the punch-line of many jokes on late night television. Criticized as “poorly incentivized,” when compared to their for-profit brethren, FEMA lacked the ability to quickly respond to emergent conditions in the Gulf Coast area (Henninger, 2005). According to Dr. Walter Williams (2006), trying to make governmental agencies as efficient as private businesses is “...as hopeless as teaching cats to bark and dogs to meow.”

The school choice movement hopes to promote their position as a way to upgrade the American public education system - to leverage parental pressure into a more effective education establishment (Hill, 1999). School choice advocates believe that the central planning model used by FEMA is dissonantly similar to the approach used by state and local education agencies. Decentralized decision-making is the most logical solution because at the end of the day, both the school and the parents will have their own best interests at heart (Harrison, 2005). If parents are determined to only select the best school for their child, and if schools are determined that they have to be the best to “draw” students in; then school choice will have proven itself to be a self-fulfilling prophecy as well as a ‘win-win’ situation.

According to Sobel and Leeson (2006), no centralized authority - relief agency or school district - can match the efficiency and competence of the free market. Regardless of how well intentioned its leaders and employees are, the general weakness of central planning is that it is too slow to respond and adapt to variations in the marketplace. Statewide curriculum transformations and modifications to organizational structures occur too rapidly to be managed

effectively and efficiently by one primary agency. Best of all, reformers insist that school choice plans have accountability built right into the system (Gryphon & Meyer, 2003). Schools that offer parents what they want (quality education) at a price they are willing to pay will attract students and thrive, while schools that cannot will pay the ultimate price and cease to exist (McCluskey, 2005).

### Parental Choice

Ubiquitous in *No Child Left Behind* are choice provisions inducing parents to become - and stay - more involved in their children's education. Researchers have long been interested in what draws parents to a particular school and/or pushes them away from another school. The various factors can be lumped together into assorted categories, including academic factors as well as non-academic factors. According to Bagley (1996) and Bell (2007), the primary factors include the location of the school and the overall (academic and social) perception of the school. Additional researchers such as Levine-Rasky (2007) and Howell (2006) have also suggested that the perception of the school drives the parental choice process.

Contemporary parental choice studies are not limited to wealthy families. Recent research has indicated that low and middle income families choose schools for the same reasons and through the same mechanics - school visits, meetings with teachers and administrators, print materials, and word of mouth reviews - as do their wealthier counterparts. Viaden (2007) has written extensively about the primary and secondary reasons these families choose specific schools. Her research reveals that approximately half (45%) of the respondents choose schools for their overall academic quality, nineteen percent choose schools because of their specific

thematic focus, and eleven percent choose schools primarily for their location. Moreover, once students are enrolled in their school of choice, the empowerment and choice provisions of NCLB continue to exert their forces. Howell (2006) suggests that parents that have students enrolled in “underperforming schools” are more likely to request a transfer than parents who have a student in a “higher performing school.” In fact, the former group requests a transfer approximately 25% of the time, compared with the latter group which does so at a 10% rate.

### Chapter Summary

Many school districts, over the past generation, have decided to organize themselves in accordance with something researchers refer to as, “middle school values” (Pounder, 1998; Schukar, 1997). Successful middle schools provide pubescent children with a comfortable sense of stasis in their otherwise convoluted lives. The focus of these middle schools is both on the child as well as on the curriculum. According to Kilcrease (1995), middle schools perform three primary functions that facilitate their accomplishments: 1. They provide a program that meets the diverse needs of their students; 2. They promote the continuity of their education; and 3. They introduce, when appropriate, essential innovations in curriculum and instruction.

In addition to the middle school movement, there is a development, running independently and concurrently, that focuses its energy on the establishment and promotion of magnet schools. Originally developed and implemented to disentangle schools from segregation concerns, magnet schools have since matured and focused their labors on curricular innovation and establishing unique educational environments (Metz, 1992; Rossell, 1990). Magnet schools now serve students from an extensively broad geographical region and, because their existence



depends on voluntary enrollment, must deliver high-quality education to their students (Blank, 1984). Accordingly, many magnet schools are now lauded for their unrivaled educational agendas and wonderful accomplishments (McAuliffe-Strauss, 2004).

Lastly, the concept of school choice was examined for trends and theories in an effort to relate this concept to school improvement goals and objectives. Originally the strict province of economists, school choice has been growing in popularity as a stand-alone solution to problems facing American educators (Harrison, 2005). Choice theorists claim that without competition, there can be no meaningful and systemic improvements made to the American public school establishment.

Advocates of school choice believe that education reformers have, “exhumed the worst social engineering ideas over the past four decades while dumping all over real school choice” (Hardy, 2006). Their arguments are simple and uncomplicated: schools should be required to ply their trades in the same competitive environment that other, more efficient and effective organizations, must contend with. This competitive pressure, it is argued, will force schools to “get better or get out” (McCluskey, 2005).

## Chapter III

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### Setting - The Township - Montclair, New Jersey

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the setting of this study as well as a detailed examination of the participants and instrumentation used therein. The intent of this study is to identify and assay the significant factors influencing middle school choice in a diverse K-12 school district in Northern New Jersey. Described in the September, 2001 issue of *New York Magazine* as the, “Upper West Side of the Suburbs,” Montclair is a progressive municipality enveloped by more traditional communities.

Accordingly, Montclair has long been at the forefront of educational reform and efforts to ameliorate the conditions of historically underprivileged groups. A founding member of the progressive MSAN (Minority Student Achievement Network; a national coalition of twenty-five, diverse and largely affluent urban-suburban districts), the Montclair Public Schools are committed to building, and developing the skills necessary for high academic achievement for all minority students. Understanding, narrowing, and eventually eliminating the “achievement gap” has been a constant Board of Education goal for well over a decade.

In addition to membership in this prestigious, research-based group, Montclair is also the proud home to a magnet school system for over thirty years. Originally created to comply with a

court-ordered desegregation plan, this unique arrangement allows for students in the municipality to attend any of the seven elementary schools or three middle schools regardless of which part of town they live in (with only one high school in town, it is assumed that Montclair High School is not considered a true magnet school). The reasoning connected to the development of this magnet school system was to counterbalance the de-facto segregated neighborhoods and prevent them from funneling into de-facto segregated schools. Each school has created a specific magnet theme to provide parents and children an opportunity to attend schools that are quite different from one another.

What has emerged is a school district distinctive in the fact that it is one of the few districts in the state of New Jersey that does not have “neighborhood schools.” Each magnet theme was created to draw students from all parts of the community; allowing students from different sections of town to attend the same school. In a town that still struggles with entrenched, de-facto segregated residency patterns, the magnet-themed schools allow students from the entire community to attend and thrive in diverse school settings. The Montclair Public Schools currently enroll students from two different zip codes: 07042 and 07043. According to the 2000 United States Census, the 07042 zip code is 47.6% Caucasian and 43.5% African-American. The zip code 07043 is 89.1% Caucasian and 6.9% African-American.

Parents and children in Montclair are able to compare and contrast each school before making their selection. During the controlled-choice registration process, schools will make presentations and have open-house tours so that parents and their children can participate in the process of choosing a school at the Kindergarten and Middle School levels. It should also be noted that once students are enrolled in a particular school, parents can request a transfer at any time, though most wait until after the school year.

Census data from 2000 indicates that approximately 39,000 residents call this township home. Located in Northern New Jersey along the eastern ridge of the scenic Watchung Mountains, a scant twelve miles west of Manhattan, Montclair is home to a thriving arts community, craft shops, restored older homes replete with lush landscapes, various social interest groups, as well as a population that is diverse in the deepest sense of the word. Roughly 60% of its populace is non-Hispanic Caucasian while almost 32% of its residents have classified themselves as African-American. There is also a growing number of Montclairians classifying themselves as either Hispanic (5%) or Asian (3%).

Montclair also enjoys rare levels of socio-economic diversity not usually found in typical bedroom communities. The New Jersey State Department of Education categorizes each school district into a socio-economic district factor group ranging from “A” (poorest) to “J” (wealthiest). The Montclair Public Schools were recently (2004) reclassified as an “I” district, the second wealthiest consortium in the state. Although there is a great deal of affluence in this community, Montclair also struggles with issues (achievement gaps, crime, and substance abuse) linked to poverty.

Moreover, pockets of neediness remain scattered about in this pleasant town, and approximately 16% of the students in the district qualify for the federal free/reduced lunch program in 2006 – a unique anomaly in such a prosperous town. There are very few other towns that can compare to Montclair’s unique assemblage of ethno-racial diversity, socio-economic diversity, religious diversity as well as its long-regarded history and support of progressive causes. In an understated manner, the township remains proudly atypical and defiantly unique.

#### Setting - The Montclair Public Schools

For the 2006-2007 school year, there are approximately 6700 students in this K-12 district, along with a hybrid public-private Pre-K program. These students are scattered about its six square miles in seven elementary schools (five serve K-5, one serves K-2 and another serves 3-5), which feed into three middle schools (Grades 6-8), which, in turn feed one public high school for grades 9-12. The focus of this study is primarily on the three magnet middle schools which receive a new class of sixth grade students each year, although there will be some mention of the six elementary schools which house grade five students and “feed” them into the middle schools.

### The History of Controlled Choice

Glenn (1991) broadly defines four goals of any controlled choice plan:

1. To give all pupils in a community equal access to every public school in that community regardless of where they live;
2. To involve parents in the school choice decision-making process;
3. To create pressure for the improvement, over time, of every school through the elimination of guaranteed enrollment on the basis of residence; and
4. Where necessary, to achieve racial desegregation of every school with as few mandatory assignments as possible.

Montclair has always been a diverse community and for most of its history, students attended the traditional neighborhood schools. Slowly, over time, the community developed de-facto segregated residential patterns where specific neighborhoods were white and others black. Again, slowly, over time, two school districts emerged - one white and one black - separate and certainly not equal. The seminal moment for the Montclair Public Schools came in the late 1960s when a group of African-American parents sued the district, on behalf of their children, in what became known as the *Rice vs. Montclair Board of Education* case. According to the *Montclair Times*, this case “challenged racial isolation in local schools” and the district was forced to comply with a court ordered de-segregation plan. Rather than exclusively utilizing busing to abide by this order, the Montclair Public Schools designed a unique system of magnet schools.

The magnet system that gradually emerged has become a source of pride, both in the district as well as in the larger community. Realtors have been able to use this exceptionality as a selling point in the local real estate market. Educators come to the district from other nearby communities, as well as from out of state to study the inimitable magnet programs already in place in the Montclair Public Schools. This over thirty year experiment culminated in the fall of 2005, when the United States Department of Education made a site visit and subsequently named the Montclair Public Schools one of six model magnet school districts in the entire country. According to a United States Department of Education press release, “Montclair has become essentially an all-magnet district, providing a high level of choice for Montclair families”.

The Montclair Public Schools also benefit from various parent and community involvement groups (Special Education Parent Advisory Council, Health and Wellness Partnership, True Blue Spirit, and Improving Montclair Achievement Network Initiative), each tailored to meet the needs of an exclusive group of students, or customized to a specific need

within the district or community. These groups operate independently from the district, yet they are able to coordinate their efforts with the Montclair Public Schools to maximize their efficiency and leverage economies of scale. Monthly meetings and annual convocations are held and school personnel are welcomed and encouraged to participate to further strengthen the bonds between the public schools and the private associations. The district also has secured the services of a Family Coordinator, a full-time position designed and created to capitalize on the high levels of community interest and involvement in the public schools.

One such private organization, the Josh and Judy Weston Foundation, is mainly interested in teaching excellence. Their foundation rewards outstanding teachers, nominated by community stakeholders, with a check for \$2,000.00 to be spent at that teacher's discretion. Another group, the Montclair Fund for Educational Excellence (MFEE) raises capital throughout the year and then proceeds to funnel that same money back into magnet enhancement programs via Magnet Enhancement Grants as well as Professional Development Grants. Teachers and administrators are encouraged to write grants tailored to a specific need within a particular school. Although Montclair is not the only district in the state to have its own "Fund", it is important to note that the level of participation within this community is elevated, relative to similar communities in New Jersey. For the fiscal school year 2004-2005, MFEE had an annual operating budget of over \$1.4 million.

The school choice procedures in the Montclair Public Schools offer parents/children options at both the elementary level as well as the middle school level. Due to the fact that there is only one high school in the district, students are limited to school choice at the K-8 grades exclusively. The controlled choice process is described on the district's website:

In Montclair, children do not necessarily attend the school closest to their homes. They may attend any school their parents choose provided there is space available and racial balance is maintained. The Board of Education has developed specialized programs in each of the schools and believes children are best served by a program that most closely supports their individual learning styles.

Some schools are more tightly structured than others; some provide the opportunity for children to select their own curricular focus. Several schools are decidedly teacher-directed; others are more child-centered. It is important to understand, however, that learning styles are not related to intelligence. Many able learners work most productively within a well-ordered schedule. Others do well with greater direction from the teacher. Because research suggests children learn best when they have a peaked interest in their learning, a different, specialized program has been established at each school. All schools follow the same basic curriculum, but each offers a different structure or special activities related to its own special theme.

It is not a case of which is the best school in town. They are all outstanding schools. But there is no one school, no one organization that is best for all children. Rather, it is a matter of what program is best for the child. The decision is made by the parents with the assistance of the Board of Education staff. Although the basic curriculum is the same, each school offers special programs consistent with its own magnet theme.

The controlled choice process in Montclair begins in earnest each year after the first of January. At that time the Montclair Public Schools provide parents with a DVD containing information about each of the three middle schools, as well as facts about the district as a whole. Each DVD is also available to be downloaded off the district's website or emailed as a Podcast. Approximately two weeks after that information is made available to parents, each school opens its doors for a full week of open-house presentations and tours. Working around the busy schedules of parents and other pertinent stakeholders, each school offers tours and question and answer sessions both during the school day, as well as during the evening. This is in accordance



with research that demonstrates the importance of providing parents with timely information utilizing a variety of mediums (Glenn, 1991).

Once parents have completed the building tours and open-house question and answer sessions, the district provides a Middle School Freedom of Choice application which is made available on March 1<sup>st</sup>. No guarantees are made regarding school placement, but the district (according to its website) requires that, “the system provides flexibility and maintains racial balance.” On April 1<sup>st</sup>, parents are notified of which magnet middle school they have been assigned to.

#### Magnet Elementary Schools – descriptions from each school’s website

##### *Bradford School – The University Magnet - Grades K-5*

The Bradford program and staff provide a communication-rich environment through the innovative use of technology. The theme-based educational environment strives to enhance students’ ability to gather information, to communicate, to problem solve, to think critically and to develop life-long learning skills.

##### *Edgemont School – The Montessori Magnet - Grades K-5*

Established in 1987 as Montclair’s only public Montessori School, Edgemont School provides an educational experience that is deeply rooted in respect for the whole child. Differentiation - the capacity to respond academically, socially, culturally, cognitively and emotionally to the diverse learning abilities and needs of students is the hallmark of a Montessori education, and the calling card of Edgemont School. Students progress through the standards-

based, balanced curriculum with acceleration and enrichment as facilitated by diverse instructional techniques, flexible groupings and other developmentally appropriate practices that promote rigor, high expectations and academic success for all students.

*Hillside School – The Gifted and Talented Magnet - Grades 3-5*

Hillside School's Gifted and Talented magnet program presumes all children have special gifts and talents. It is the school's responsibility to identify and nurture each child's special abilities. Because of the wide variety of choices at Hillside, students of all abilities, interests and background are able to discover areas in which they will excel. With its high academic standards and strong performing arts program, Hillside provides students with a positive environment where responsibility and maturity are stressed.

*Northeast School – International Magnet School of Global Studies - K-5*

Global studies are a powerful perspective for examining and understanding our world's people, places and problems. Geography is a subject that can unite the curriculum and support academic skills. Studying the world provides our students opportunities to reflect on cultural diversity, the global economy, politics and real-life issues. Global education at Northeast School is a meaningful way to excite children about learning and to teach the necessary skills they will need as tomorrow's citizens, leaders, peacemakers and protectors of our resources.

*Rand School – The Family and Environmental Magnet - Grades K-5*

Rand school's mission is to inspire in children a love of learning and a curiosity about their world. We value diversity and honor individual learning styles. Rand prepares students in a collaborative, high-quality academic environment to contribute to the community with confidence and compassion.

*Watchung School – The Science and Technology Magnet - Grades K-5*

Watchung School is committed to insuring student mastery of basic skills including the communication and problem solving skills necessary to function in an increasingly technological world. Recognizing the growing importance of science, mathematics, and technology we strive to insure that all of our students are well prepared in these areas. Watchung School is convinced that the computer is a medium that belongs in the world of children and should be incorporated in all curriculum areas. Watchung School fully recognizes that involvement is the key to intellectual development. Thus, we are intent on providing continuing opportunities for hands-on activity-centered, concrete learning experiences at every grade level and in all curriculum areas.

Magnet Middle Schools – descriptions from each school's website

*Glenfield Middle School – The Visual and Performing Arts Magnet - Grades 6-8*

Glenfield Middle School reflects the energy, sense of possibility and engagement that is indicative of the adolescents it serves. The nature of the program at Glenfield for grades six, seven and eight is such that youngsters have choices to explore and search for ways to become better communicators and problem-solvers. Students are assigned to one of seven houses. Within the "house" structure the sense of family is developed. The values of family are affirmed in the

house structure and students are supported by a team of teachers who unfold the mysteries of life through language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. This team teaching approach is integral to Glenfield remaining true to its core middle school values. Students and teachers remain in the same house for three consecutive years and get to know each other's strengths and weaknesses over that time period. This process, called "looping" is central to turning a large comprehensive middle school into seven smaller learning communities.

Glenfield's program unfolds the process, the craft, the self-reflection, the rehearsing, the remaking and the doubting that goes into that which is referred to as excellence. Through a multitude of experiences, its children make sense of their lives cognitively, perceptually, imaginatively and effectively.

*Mount Hebron Middle School – The Science and Technology Magnet - Grades 6-8*

Mount Hebron Middle School provides a thorough academic, artistic, physical and technological education for students in grades six, seven and eight. In order to prepare its students for a lifetime of change, the program emphasizes achievement, exploration, skill mastery, and critical thinking. Mount Hebron provides an orderly environment in which learning takes place. Adolescents develop respect for themselves and others. Computers and the use of technology as tools for the future are integral parts of the program. Students with inquiring minds who have a strong interest in science, mathematics, as well as in technology and its applications will flourish in this stimulating and exciting environment.

Mount Hebron School's Magnet theme is science and technology. The school is fully equipped with science labs and state-of-the-art computers. Students access information, apply

technologies to solve real world problems and connect with people and ideas from around the world. Technology is an integral component in all classes as a means to deliver content, as well as, to provide a vehicle for self-expression.

Students at MHMS also benefit from the “House” structure as well the concept of looping. Students and teachers remain in the same “House” for three consecutive years. Moreover, MHMS is a “block schedule” school. Students take their basics classes (math, science, language arts, social studies and technology and physical education) for an 80 minute double block period. These classes meet every other day and allow the teachers and students to delve deep into their subject matter.

*Renaissance Middle School – Where Learning is a Constant and Standards Are Exceeded -*

*Grades 6-8*

The Renaissance community is composed of a rich diversity of family backgrounds, geographic origins, achievement histories, talents known, needs and strengths. At the heart of the Renaissance School are students and faculty who investigate ideas through an interdisciplinary thematic curriculum. The thematic approach centers on essential questions that provide the discipline to exceed state and school district standards.

At Renaissance Middle School, an expression commonly heard is, “the community is our classroom.” Indeed, it is. RMS shares space with its landlord, the Catholic K-8 Immaculate Conception School, and is forced to look elsewhere to solve its facility issues. Accordingly, the students at RMS utilize various facilities across the community such as a professional dance studio, an indoor soccer stadium and the state of the art Montclair Art Museum. Students and

staff venture out into the community at different times during the school day to take advantage of these resources. To compensate for the time spent in transit, RMS has an extended day schedule. School does not dismiss until 4:00 (Monday-Thursday) and 2:30 on Friday. Classes at RMS are scheduled to meet every other day for a double block of 75 minutes. This block schedule is enhanced by two additional 60 minute instructional classes per week, one each for math and language arts.

Students at RMS also complete a Community Service activity to further enhance their connection within the larger community. Whether serving as a tutor to elementary school children or working with local non-profit organizations, RMS students consistently find the time to volunteer their services to others. This is in harmony with the mission statement of RMS.

### Population and Sample

Working with the Montclair Public Schools District Registrar, the researcher was able to determine that during the school year 2006-07, there were 522 students in grade five in one of the aforementioned five elementary schools. Using SPSS (Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences) 14.0, the researcher developed a computer-generated random selection of 250 from a population of 522. This methodology allows each person the same chance of being selected for the survey, an important feature to limit potential researcher bias. Three (3) envelopes were returned, unopened, as undeliverable by the post office, leaving the researcher with a possible sample of 247 parents/caregivers. Fourteen (14) surveys were considered invalid because the subject did not fully complete the survey or had specific technical difficulties. One hundred fourteen (114) completed valid surveys using Seton Hall University's ASSET (Academic Survey

System and Evaluation Tool) software. This constituted a percentage of 46.1%, slightly less than half. It is important to note that when specific subgroups had fewer than eight (8) members, the data was not reported so as to not violate the precepts of confidentiality promised in the survey introduction.

Potential bias or limited objectivity of the respondents might be a concern. Furthermore, this study is limited by the concept of self-selection. By its very nature, this study relies exclusively on the parents/caregivers voluntarily completing the survey. This study is also limited by the survey instrument which was initially used by Dr. Adunni Anderson (2004) in another study to research school choice at the kindergarten level. This study was re-designed by the researcher to determine which factors affect choice decisions at the middle school level. The original survey was selected as the basis for this study after careful examination. It is considered reliable and has also successfully been used for a study involving parental school choice within the Montclair Public Schools.

This survey instrument is both quantitative as well as qualitative in nature, and respondents will be asked to commit to answering multi-choice elements, short answer questions on a Likert-type scale, as well as open-ended inquiries. Respondents are also asked to share pertinent demographic data which provides the researcher with greater opportunities to disaggregate data by race, gender, socio-economic status, et cetera.

### Instrumentation

The instrumentation used in this study was a survey created by Dr. Adunni Anderson (2004) and used previously in a similar study. Dr. Anderson was contacted (Appendix B) and

granted permission (Appendix B) for portions of that survey to be used in this study. The survey, renamed *Survey of Middle School Choice* (Appendix D) was modified to better reflect choice concerns related to the middle school level, and was completed by parents/caregivers of grade five students, enrolled in the Montclair Public Schools for school year 2006-07. The survey consisted of four subsets, all pertaining to factors influencing middle school choice decisions: (a) curriculum issues; (b) social-emotional components; (c) co-curricular concerns; and (d) open-ended written responses. There was also a demographics section where respondents shared information pertaining to ethno-racial background, as well as gender and socio-economic status. The study was pre-tested and validated in June, 2007. Twenty-four (24) surveys were mailed out and sixteen (16) completed surveys were returned to the researcher. This represented a response rate of 66.67%. The four primary questions to be answered in this study are:

1. What is the primary factor affecting middle school choice as made by fifth grade parents/caregivers before their children enter sixth grade at one of three magnet middle schools in a diverse K-12 public school district in Northern New Jersey?
2. What are other factors affecting middle school choice as made by fifth grade parents/caregivers before their children enter sixth grade at one of three magnet middle schools in a diverse K-12 public school district in Northern New Jersey?
3. How is the middle school choice decision affected by the respondent's ethno-racial background?
4. How is the middle school choice decision affected by the respondent's socio-economic level?



## Reliability Analysis

Reliability Coefficients - Number of Cases (N) = 60.0

Number of Items (N) = 16

Scale: Alpha - Alpha = 0.6107

## Data Collection

The researcher contacted the Montclair Superintendent of Schools to solicit approval for the research to be conducted (Appendix B). Once approval was established (Appendix B), the researcher contacted the district registrar and printed up labels containing the mailing address of the randomly selected parents/caregivers of a grade five student. The identified parents/caregivers received by U.S. First Class mail a letter of introduction (Appendix C) as well as an internet address where they could go to take the survey online using Seton Hall ASSET (Academic Survey System and Evaluation Tool) software.

The survey was modified to better reflect the issues affecting middle school choice and was designed to identify and isolate significant factors that affected the middle school choice decision faced by parents at the end of their child's fifth grade year. The survey has three sections: Part I requires subjects to answer questions to the middle school choice selections process on a Likert-type scale as well as using multi-choice elements. A 4-point Likert-type Scale required participants to select one of four choices: SD (*Strongly Disagree*), D (*Disagree*), A (*Agree*) or SA (*Strongly Agree*) to each statement. These four points were correlated with the

following values *Strongly Disagree* = 1.0, *Disagree* = 2.0, *Agree* = 3.0, *Strongly Agree* = 4.0.

Mean scores in between 2.5 and 3.0 were considered to be *fairly important* indicators of middle school choice. Mean scores greater than 3.0 were considered *highly important* indicators of middle school choice.

Part II involved open-ended questions and provided the subjects the opportunity to answer specific questions arranged around the four primary research questions, and make available to the researcher any additional information they believed to be vital. Part III of the survey was designed to allow for demographic and background information.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data emerging from Part I of this survey was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS 14.0) as well as Seton Hall University's ASSET software. Qualitative information revealed by this survey was facilitated by searching for common key words and phrases in order to gain a better understanding of the overall mood of the respondents. Aggregate results, frequency statistics and tables were utilized to better encapsulate the data and present it in Chapters IV and V.

Information about the gender of the child, ethnicity of the child and socio-economic status of the family, gleaned from the demographics section of the survey, was analyzed using frequency statistics as well as tables. The open-ended responses, found in Part II of the survey, were transcribed and dissected for common themes and key phrases. Answers to the Likert-type questions, found in Part I of the survey, were examined using frequency statistics, comparison of the means, standard deviation and ranked means.

## Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the setting of this study, as well as a detailed examination of the participants and instrumentation used. The intent of this study is to identify and examine the significant factors influencing middle school choice in a diverse K-12 school district in Northern New Jersey. The Montclair Public Schools were chosen as the setting for this study due to the fact that the district has a long and storied (over thirty years) history of having magnet schools and elements of school choice already in place. Parents in this community have the option of selecting from among seven K-5 elementary schools, as well as three 6-8 middle schools.

The concept of school choice is deep-rooted in this community and is now viewed by many stakeholders as an inalienable right. The researcher was interested in examining what factors parents take into consideration when they select a middle school for their child. This information can easily be disaggregated across various demographic groups and filtered with various statistical treatments. What the researcher is left with is a clear indication of what programs, curricula and environments parents desire for their children. Optimally, this information is used to promote school improvement both within, and outside the district.

## Chapter IV

### ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

#### Introduction

This study was designed to determine specific factors influencing parents when selecting a magnet middle school in a diverse K-12 school district in Northern New Jersey. This research was centered on the perceptions and experiences of parents as they participate in the middle school registration process of the Montclair (N.J.) Public Schools. Specifically, the researcher looked to unearth pertinent developments and discover trends that explain why parents prefer one middle school over another, when given the opportunity to select from among three public magnet middle schools, or private middle schools in the vicinity. The four primary research questions served as the structural and philosophical underpinnings of this study.

The purpose of this chapter is to state the results of the *Survey of Middle School Choice*, completed online by all respondents. The *Survey of Middle School Choice* consisted of distinct sections (multi-choice elements, Likert-type responses, open-ended responses, and demographic information) and was intended to answer the four primary research questions:

1. What is the primary factor affecting middle school choice as made by fifth grade parents/caregivers before their children enter sixth grade at one of three magnet middle schools in a diverse K-12 public school district in Northern New Jersey?
2. What are other factors affecting middle school choice as made by fifth grade parents/caregivers before their children enter sixth grade at one of three magnet middle schools in a diverse K-12 public school district in Northern New Jersey?
3. How is the middle school choice decision affected by the respondent's ethno-racial background?
4. How is the middle school choice decision affected by the respondent's socio-economic level?

The researcher utilized ASSET (Academic Survey System and Evaluation Tool) Software at Seton Hall University to facilitate the collection and interpretation of the data. Additionally the researcher used SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) 14.0 to further examine survey responses for significance.

#### *Description of the Participants*

Of the 522 fifth grade students in the Montclair Public Schools during the 2006-07 school year, the researcher used SPSS 14.0 to develop a random selection of 250. This methodology allows each person the same chance of being selected for the survey, an important feature to limit potential researcher bias.

This study is limited by the concept of self-selection and is dependent on parents voluntarily completing the survey. This study is also limited by the survey instrument - already validated - which had been successfully used by Dr. Adunni Anderson (2004) in a school choice study at the kindergarten level in the Montclair Public Schools, and remodeled by the researcher to determine which factors affect choice decisions at the middle school level. This survey instrument encompasses quantitative as well as qualitative elements. Specific phrases such as, *Quality of the Teaching Staff*, *Quality of the Administration* or *Nurturing Culture* were left undefined, and may have been interpreted differently by different subjects. This represents another limitation.

In addition to these concerns, an additional limitation emerges from the survey implementation. The researcher decided to use Seton Hall University's ASSET (Academic Survey System and Evaluation Tool) software to conduct the survey. ASSET software allows the researcher to position the survey online and provide potential respondents with a web address to complete the survey. Observably, this leads to the limitation associated with the suspected "digital divide." To participate in this study, a subject would most likely need to have computer hardware, high-speed internet access and the technology skills and confidence necessary to complete this survey. It is probable that the self-selected sample size of 114 represents a subset of tech-savvy people, which in itself is a limitation. There was no option of completing the survey on paper.

Moreover, this study is limited by the fact that the researcher serves as the Principal of Glenfield Visual and Performing Arts Magnet Middle School, one of the three Magnet Middle Schools in the Montclair Public Schools. Promoted from his previous position as Assistant Principal of Hillside Gifted and Talented Magnet Elementary School in July, 2006, the

researcher has a professional relationship with some of the subjects in this survey. The researcher, while in the capacity of building principal, also participated in many of the open-house events as well as different orientation meetings with parents, school staff and Central Office Administrative Personnel.

For the fifth grade class of 2007, all but six parents/students were assigned their first choice in middle school. The six parents/students who did not receive their first choice (Renaissance Middle School) were assigned to their second choice, either Mount Hebron Middle School or Glenfield Middle School. This was due to space limitations at Renaissance Middle School. According to the October 15, 2007 Montclair Board of Education Enrollment Report, the sixth grade enrollment for the 2007-08 school year was as follows: Glenfield N=238; Mount Hebron N=185 and Renaissance N=84. The survey results indicate a disproportionately high number of respondents attending Glenfield. It is possible, perhaps even probable, that parents selecting Glenfield would have taken a greater interest in completing this survey than would parents who selected other middle schools.

### *Gender of the Child*

In the demographic section of the survey, participants were asked to identify the gender of the child they were registering for middle school placement. Table 1 reveals that the selected sample represents 54 male students (47.4%) and 60 female students (52.6%). Table 2 (males) and Table 3 (females) reveals the middle school choice by the gender of the child. Forty two (77.8%) males selected Glenfield, five (9.2%) selected Mount Hebron and seven (13.0%) chose to attend Renaissance Middle School. There were also forty two (70.0%) females who chose

Glenfield, eleven (18.3%) who chose Mount Hebron and seven (11.7%) who chose to attend Renaissance Middle School.

Table 1

*Gender*

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	54	47.4	47.4
Female	60	52.6	100.0
Total	114	100.0	100.0

Table 2

*Middle School Choice – Male*

Middle School	Number	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Glenfield	42	77.8	77.8
Mount Hebron	5	9.2	87.0
Renaissance	7	13.0	100.0
Total	54	100.0	100.0

Table 3

*Middle School Choice – Female*



Middle School	Number	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Glenfield	42	70.0	70.0
Mount Hebron	11	18.3	88.3
Renaissance	7	11.7	100.0
Total	60	100.0	100.0

*Ethnic Code*

When initially registering their child in the Montclair Public Schools, parents self-select from among the following choices, an ethnic code for their child: Asian/Pacific Islander, Bi/Multi-Racial, Caucasian, Hispanic, African-American or Other. Due to the strong history of ethnic diversity in Montclair, the entrenched Civil Rights legacy, and existing court-ordered desegregation mandate, the researcher decided it would be wise to collect data concerning the ethnicity of the children who were being represented on the surveys. As students in the Montclair Public Schools, they are directly affected by the court-ordered desegregation mandate still in effect to this day. Of the sample population, eight checked Bi/Multi-Racial (7.1%), eighty-five checked Caucasian (75.2%) and ten checked African-American (8.8%). One response was missing.

Relative to the overall demographic makeup of the Montclair Public Schools, there were a disproportionately high number of Caucasian respondents, and a disproportionately low number of African-American respondents. Accordingly, this survey is statistically more likely to represent how Caucasian families choose middle schools in Montclair New Jersey. Table 4

details the ethnic code of the respondents and Table 5 details the ethnic code of the entire Montclair Public Schools for the 2007-08 school year.

Table 4

*Ethnic Code*

	Frequency	Percent
Bi-Multi Racial	8	7.0
Caucasian	85	74.6
African American	10	8.8

Table 5

*Ethnic Code – Montclair Public Schools 2007-08 School Year*

	Frequency	Percent
Asian	367	5.6
African-American	2441	37.2
Caucasian	3280	50.0
Hispanic	459	7.0
Other	14	0.2

Further disaggregation of the data reveals the specific middle schools chosen by these groups. Research question number three speculated whether or not the middle school choice decision was affected by the ethnicity of the child. To protect the anonymity of the respondents, specific subgroups were not reported. Tables 6 to 8 reveal the data.

Table 6

*Middle School Choice - Bi/Multi Racial*

Middle School	Number	Percent
Glenfield	5	62.5
Mount Hebron	2	25.0
Renaissance	1	12.5
Total	8	100.0

Table 7

*Middle School Choice - Caucasian*

Middle School	Number	Percent
Glenfield	61	71.8
Mount Hebron	12	14.1
Renaissance	12	14.1
Total	85	100.0

Table 8

*Middle School Choice - African-American (table continues)*

Middle School	Number	Percent
Glenfield	9	90.0
Mount Hebron	1	10.0
Renaissance	0	0.0
Total	10	100.0

*Socio-Economic Status*

Similar to high levels of ethnic diversity found in Montclair, there is also a tremendous amount of economic diversity present in the community. The New Jersey State Department of Education categorizes each school district into a socio-economic district factor group ranging from “A” (poorest) to “J” (wealthiest). The Montclair Public Schools were recently (2004) reclassified as an “I” district, the second wealthiest consortium in the state. Although there is a great deal of affluence in this community, Montclair also struggles with issues (achievement gaps, crime, and substance abuse) linked to poverty. Moreover, pockets of neediness remain scattered about in this pleasant town, and approximately 16% of the students in the district qualify for the federal free/reduced lunch program in 2006.

Respondents were asked to select an approximate annual yearly income for their household. Due to the assumed high cost of living in Northern New Jersey in general, and Montclair in particular, respondents earning under \$49,999 per year were classified as Low SES;

those households earning between \$50,000 and \$99,999 were classified as Medium SES, and the households earning over \$100,000 were categorized as High SES. Two of the surveys returned indicated Low SES (1.8%), eighteen of the surveys returned revealed Medium SES (15.9%) and ninety-three of the surveys returned indicated Higher SES (82.3%). One response was missing.

Survey results indicate that there were a disproportionately high number of respondents from the High SES category, and a disproportionately low number of respondents from the Low SES category. This is partially due to the ‘digital divide’ in our society where some citizens have computers, high-speed internet access, computer skills and ample leisure time and others do not. Moreover, there is evidence (Freedom of Choice applications, Open House/Orientation attendance, and School Review attendance) which indicates that Low SES families dedicate less time to the middle school choice process than do their High SES counterparts. Other than the original Letter of Solicitation (Appendix C) and follow up Letter of Solicitation (Appendix C), there was no other effort to contact families identified as Low SES. Accordingly, the sample size for Low SES is too small to be reported. This survey, in essence, represents how Medium SES and High SES families choose middle schools in Montclair, New Jersey. Tables 9 to 11 reveal this information.

Table 9

*SES*

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Low SES	2	1.8	1.8
Medium SES	18	15.9	17.7

High SES	93	82.3	100.0
Total	113	100.0	100.0

Table 10

*Middle School Choice – Medium SES*

Middle School	Number	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Glenfield	14	77.8	77.8
Mount Hebron	1	5.6	83.4
Renaissance	3	16.7	100.0
Total	18	100.0	100.0

Table 11

*Middle School Choice – High SES*

Middle School	Number	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Glenfield	68	73.1	73.1
Mount Hebron	14	15.1	88.2
Renaissance	11	11.8	100.0
Total	93	100.0	100.0

*Middle School Choice*

Survey participants were directed to select one of four options for their middle school of choice. The Montclair Public Schools have three distinct magnet middle schools, Glenfield, Mount Hebron and Renaissance. Parents and their children have equal access to each of the three middle schools as well as the option (many also have the ability) to send their child to a private middle school. The completed surveys revealed that eighty-four respondents selected Glenfield (73.7%), sixteen respondents selected Mount Hebron (14%) and fourteen selected Renaissance (12.2%). Zero surveys indicated that a private school was selected (0%). Table 12 reveals this information.

Table 12

*Middle School - SES*

Middle School	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Glenfield	84	73.7	73.7
Mt. Hebron	16	14.0	87.7
Renaissance	14	12.3	100.0
Private School	0	0	100.0
Total	114	100.0	100.0

Additionally, respondents were asked to check-off all reasons why they selected their preferred middle school. Of the twelve listed choices (this was a multi-choice element; respondents could select as many options as they wished; accordingly, the total percentages will

be greater than 100%) there were four that were checked by a majority of respondents.

Indicators selected by over 50% of the respondents were considered to be *fairly important* factors of middle school choice. Indicators selected by over 75% of the respondents were considered to be *highly important* factors of middle school choice.

*Magnet theme* (52.6), *perception of school* (55.3%) and *quality of the administration* (64.0%) were all considered fairly important indicators of middle school choice. *Quality of the teaching staff* (84.2%) was revealed to be the only highly important indicator of middle school choice.

Table 13 displays this information in order of importance, from least important to most important.

Table 13

*Which of the Following Factors Were Important to You When Deciding Which Middle School to Select? (Check all that apply)*

Factors	Frequency	Percent
Older sibling currently enrolled	16	14.0
Older sibling graduated	22	19.3
Standardized test scores	24	21.1
Diversity of staff	24	21.1
Location of the school	30	26.3
Length of the instructional day	31	27.2
Size of the school	39	34.2
Diversity of student body	40	35.1



Magnet theme	60	52.6
Perception of school	63	55.3
Quality of the administration	73	64.0
Quality of the teaching staff	96	84.2

Part I of the *Survey of Middle School Choice* had respondents choose from one of four choices on a Likert-type scale. The choice *Strongly Disagree* was assigned a value of 1.0. The choice *Disagree* was assigned a value of 2.0. The choice *Agree* was assigned a value of 3.0. The choice *Strongly Agree* was assigned a value of 4.0. The median of the Likert-type scale was 2.5. Measures that had a mean value between 2.5 and 3.0 were considered to be *fairly important* in determining middle school choice. Measures that had a mean value of greater than 3.0 were considered to be *highly important*.

Below are the ranked mean scores (from lowest to greatest) of each of the eighteen measures of middle school choice presented in the survey. There are four factors considered to be fairly important predictors of middle school choice. These factors include whether or not the school has a reputation for creating a *nurturing culture*, the number and quality of *co-curricular activities offered* to the student body, the *specific magnet theme* of the building and the *quality of the building administration*. Factors considered highly important predictors of middle school choice include whether or not there is a *positive perception* of the school, *the quality of the teaching staff* and whether or not the *child seems to "fit in."* Table 14 contains the data.

Table 14

*The Eighteen Measures of Middle School Choice*

	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
I chose this middle school due to the fact that I have an older child currently in this middle school.	1.63	.88	107
I chose this middle school due to opportunities to participate via the School Review Team.	1.77	.61	110
I chose this middle school due to opportunities to participate via the PTA (Parent-Teacher Association).	1.85	.68	111
I chose this middle school because of its location.	1.85	.94	114
I chose this middle school due to the fact that I had an older child already graduate from this school.	1.86	.98	110
I chose this middle school due to its state standardized test scores.	2.12	.78	113
I chose this middle school because my older child had a positive experience in this school.	2.13	1.17	110
I chose this middle school because of the start/finish time of the instructional day.	2.16	.92	112
I chose this middle school because many of my child's peers decided to attend this school.	2.20	.89	113
I chose this middle school because of its size.	2.34	.89	113
I chose this middle school because of its nurturing culture.	2.76	.77	113

I chose this middle school because of the co-curricular activities offered.	2.92	.88	112
I chose this middle school because of its unique magnet theme.	2.97	.83	112
I chose this middle school because of the quality of the administration.	2.98	.83	113
I chose this middle school due to the overall positive perception of this middle school.	3.19	.70	114
I chose this middle school because of the quality of the teaching staff.	3.27	.55	113
I chose this middle school because my child seems to "fit in" here.	3.29	.66	114
I chose this middle school with my child's input.	3.65	.60	113

Note: Maximum possible mean score = 4.0; minimum mean score = 1.0.

Further disaggregation of the data reveals that there were marked differences between respondents from different ethnic groups. During Part I of the survey, respondents were provided with a list of twelve possible factors influencing middle school choice. Subjects were allowed to select as many as they wished. The researcher has determined that any factor selected by 75% or more of the respondents is considered to be important. Please note that when  $N < 8$ , the data was not reported. Table 15 reveals the following.

Table 15

*Ethnic Code*

	Factors	Percent
Bi/Multi Racial	Quality of the Teaching Staff	75
	Magnet Theme	75
Caucasian	Quality of the Teaching Staff	88.2

Additionally, the researcher decided to disaggregate the data by looking at the socio-economic status of the respondents. Income levels that ranged up to \$49,999 were labeled Low SES; income levels between \$50,000 and \$99,999 were labeled Medium SES and income levels greater than \$100,000 were labeled as High SES. The researcher has determined that any factor selected by 75% or more of the respondents is considered to be important. Please note that when  $N < 8$ , the data can be unreliable. Table 16 reveals the following.

Table 16

*SES*

	Factors	Percent
Low SES	Standardized Test Scores	100
	Quality of the Teaching Staff	100
	Quality of the Administration	100
Medium SES	Quality of the Teaching Staff	88.9

	Magnet Theme	77.8
High SES	Quality of the Teaching Staff	82.8

To clarify if there was any connection between the middle school of choice and socio-economic level of the respondent, the researcher further disaggregated the data.

Sixty-Eight respondents (73.1%) from the Higher SES category selected Glenfield as their middle school. Fourteen respondents (15.1%) selected Mount Hebron and the remaining eleven respondents (11.8%) chose to attend Renaissance. Table 17 reveals the data.

Table 17

*High SES*

	Number	Percent
Glenfield	68	73.1
Mount Hebron	14	15.1
Renaissance	11	11.8
Total	93	100.0

For the respondents classified as Medium SES (N=18), fourteen selected Glenfield as their middle school of choice. This represented a percentage of 77.8%. One selected Mount Hebron (5.6%) and three selected Renaissance (16.7%). Table 18 reveals the data.

Table 18

*Medium SES*

	Number	Percent
Glenfield	14	77.8
Mount Hebron	1	5.6
Renaissance	3	16.6
Total	18	100.0

Summary of the Data

Research Question One: What is the primary factor affecting middle school choice as made by fifth grade parents/caregivers before their children enter sixth grade at one of three magnet middle schools in a diverse K-12 public school district in Northern New Jersey?

Results from the *Survey of Middle School Choice*, reveal that the *quality of the teaching staff* is the primary factor influencing middle school choice in Montclair, New Jersey. In question one of the survey, respondents were allowed to multi-select from a bank of twelve possible factors. Approximately 84.2% (96 of 114) of the respondents indicated that this is an important factor when choosing a middle school. This percentage was higher than any other factor, making the quality of the teaching staff the primary factor influencing middle school choice.

Furthermore, when asked to indicate agreement or disagreement using a Likert-type scale, an overwhelming majority (107 of 113) of respondents revealed that they were in

agreement with the statement, “I chose this middle school because of the quality of the teaching staff.” Of the 107 respondents, 70 were in agreement and 37 were in strong agreement. Only 6 surveys came back in disagreement, and none checked off strongly disagree. To be considered highly important, criteria must have a mean score greater than 3.0. The indicator *quality of the teaching staff* had a mean score of 3.27 with a standard deviation of 0.55.

According to data gleaned from the *Survey of Middle School Choice*, the primary factor influencing middle school choice is *quality of the teaching staff*. This factor crosses all ethnic/racial lines, gender lines as well as socio-economic class. An absolute majority of the respondents in the following subcategories selected quality of the teaching staff as an important factor when deciding which middle school their child would attend: Males 79.6% (43 of 54), Females 88.3% (53 of 60), Bi-Multi Racial 75% (6 of 8), Caucasian 88.2% (75 of 85), Medium SES 88.9% (16 of 18) and High SES 82.8% (77 of 93).

Additionally, in the Likert-type section of the survey, the quality of the teaching staff had a mean score of greater than 3.0 for all the following subgroups, making it a highly important indicator of middle school choice: Males 3.20, Females 3.33, Bi-Multi Racial 3.12, Caucasian 3.25, African-American 3.30, Medium SES 3.11 and High SES 3.30. Again, we see that *quality of the teaching staff* is the primary factor influencing middle school choice for parents and caregivers in a magnet school district in Northern New Jersey.

Typical responses from the open-ended questions (questions 4-7) on the survey reveal that certain common themes and key phrases were used by various respondents when asked, “What was the most important factor that influenced your decision to send your child to a particular middle school?” Catalog One reveals some responses strongly corresponding to, and

connected with the variable “quality of the teaching staff.” The responses are verbatim what was reported on the survey and may contain grammatical/syntax errors:

### *Catalog One*

“High quality of teaching staff.”

”Its house system.”

“Mr. Adam Scribner, science teacher.”

“...the teachers were better.”

“Quality of teachers and staff.”

“Reputation of the staff.”

“The amazing teachers and unique curriculum.”

“The quality of the academics and the quality of the teaching staff.”

“The quality of the teaching staff.”

Research Question Two: What are other factors affecting middle school choice as made by fifth grade parents/caregivers before their children enter sixth grade at one of three magnet middle schools in a diverse K-12 public school district in Northern New Jersey?

Results from the *Survey of Middle School Choice*, reveal that additional factors influenced parents/caregivers as they selected a middle school for their child. There were three factors from question one checked off by over half of the respondents. *Quality of the administration* was selected by 64% (73 of 114), *perception of the school* was selected by 55.3% (63 of 114) and the distinct *magnet theme* of each school was selected by approximately 52.6%



(60 of 114). With over 50% of the respondents selecting these indicators, each of these factors is considered by the researcher to be fairly important.

Moreover, in the Likert-type segment of the survey, these three factors were again fairly important (*quality of the administration, magnet theme*) or highly important (*perception of school*). The *quality of the administration* has a mean score of 2.9823 (standard deviation 0.8343) and the *magnet theme* had a mean score of 2.9732 (standard deviation 0.8324). All mean scores of 2.5 to 3.0 were considered to be fairly important indicators of school choice. The *perception of the school* had a mean score of 3.1930 (standard deviation 0.7024) making it a highly important factor in influencing parents/caregivers as they selected a middle school for their child.

The research indicates that after the primary factor, these three issues emerge as central to the decision-making process for parents/caregivers as they attempt to choose a middle school for their child while he/she is in fifth grade. Once again, the research indicates that these three factors cross all gender, ethnic and socio-economic lines.

A majority of respondents in the following sub-categories indicated that the perception of the school was an important factor in deciding which middle school to select for their child: Males 53.7% (29 of 54), Females 56.7% (34 of 60), Caucasian 57.6% (49 of 85), Medium SES 55.6% (10 of 18) and High SES 55.9% (52 of 93). According to criteria established earlier in this study, any factor marked as important by over half of the respondents is considered to be important.

Furthermore, in the Likert-type section of the survey, the perception of the school had a mean score of greater than 3.0 for all the following subgroups, making it a highly important indicator of middle school choice: Males 3.24, Females 3.15, Bi-Multi Racial 3.12, Caucasian

3.14, African-American 3.30, Medium SES 3.22 and High SES 3.18. Once more, we see that *perception of the school* is an important factor influencing middle school choice for parents/caregivers in a magnet school district in Northern New Jersey.

The unique *magnet theme of the school* has also been determined to be an important factor influencing middle school choice. A majority of respondents in major subgroups indicated that the magnet theme of the middle school played a strong role in the decision-making process: Males 51.9% (28 of 54), Females 53.3% (32 of 60), Bi-Multi Racial 75.0% (6 of 8), Caucasian 50.6% (43 of 85), African-American 60.0% (6 of 10) and Medium SES 77.8% (14 of 18).

Additionally, in the Likert-type section of the survey the magnet theme of the school had a mean score of 2.5 to 3.0 making it fairly important: Males 2.73, Caucasian 2.93 and High SES 2.93. Also, the magnet theme had mean score of over 3.0 in the following subgroups, making it a highly important indicator of middle school choice: Females 3.18, Bi-Multi Racial 3.12, African-American 3.20, and Medium SES 3.05. To summarize, the research indicates that *magnet theme of the school* is an important factor influencing middle school choice for parents/caregivers in a magnet school district in Northern New Jersey.

In addition to the perception of the school and the magnet theme of the school, the data reveals that the *quality of the administration* is a secondary factor influencing middle school choice. A majority of respondents in major subgroups indicated that the quality of the administration was central to the decision-making process: Males 59.3% (32 of 54), Females 68.3% (41 of 60), Bi-Multi Racial 62.5.0% (5 of 8), Caucasian 64.7% (55 of 85), Medium SES 72.2% (13 of 18) and High SES 61.3% (57 of 93).

Disaggregated data found in the Likert-type section of the survey suggested that the quality of the administration was integral to the decision-making process. The following

subgroups had a mean score of 2.5 to 3.0 making it fairly important: Males 2.96, Bi-Multi Racial 2.82, Caucasian 2.97 and High SES 2.94. Also, the quality of the administration had a mean score of over 3.0 in the following subgroups, making it a highly important indicator of middle school choice: Females 3.01, African-American 3.02, and Medium SES 3.11. Summing up, the research indicates that *quality of the administration* is an important factor influencing middle school choice for parents/caregivers in a magnet school district in Northern New Jersey.

Frequent answers for the open-ended questions (questions four to seven) on the survey reveal that certain common themes and key phrases were used by various respondents when asked, “What was the most important factor that influenced your decision to send your child to a particular middle school?” These responses reveal that *perception of the school*, *magnet theme of the school* and the *quality of the administration* emerge as very common. Catalog Two reveals some responses strongly corresponding to, and connected with the perception of the school, magnet theme of the school and quality of the administration. The responses are verbatim what was reported on the survey, and may contain grammatical/syntax errors:

### *Catalog Two*

“The perception I ‘felt’ while on tour.”

“‘Fit’ was most important, i.e., that my child feels enthusiastic about going to whichever school was chosen.”

“Fit with the child’s personality/ability.”

“Arts Magnet theme.”

“Glenfield seemed to be the best fit for our son.”

“Gut feel.”

“Magnet theme and administration, equally.”

“Music and Arts program - Reputation of the quality of the school.”

“My child is heavily involved in the performing arts; I wanted her to be able to go to a school with a very good performing arts program but also a school that would keep her on track academically.”

“My daughter’s input and the magnet theme.”

“Quality of Administration.”

“The new administration was very appealing to me.”

“The recent positive change in administration.”

“...and the impression of the culture, which I thought would be good for my daughter’s personality.”

Research Question Three: How is the middle school choice decision affected by the respondent’s ethno-racial background?

When further disaggregated, the indicator *quality of the teaching staff* was the most common and important factor across the different ethnic groups. The *quality of the teaching staff* was marked as important by 75% or greater in both of the following groups: Bi/Multi Racial (75%) and Caucasian (88.2%).

Additionally, the *quality of the teaching staff* was determined to be highly important across all ethnic groupings using criteria set forth earlier in the chapter. Amongst Asian/Pacific Islanders, the indicator *quality of the teaching staff* had a mean score of 3.2 (standard deviation

0.44) making it highly important. For the Bi/Multi Racial group, *quality of the teaching staff* had a mean score of 3.12 (standard deviation 0.64). Amongst Caucasians, *quality of the teaching staff* had a mean score of 3.25 (standard deviation 0.53) and African-Americans tallied *quality of the teaching staff* with a mean score of 3.3 (standard deviation 0.64).

To further elaborate on the differences between ethnic groups in Montclair, the researcher conducted a One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to examine if there were further dissimilarities present. The research indicates that there is significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) disparities between Caucasians and African-Americans regarding the *quality of the teaching staff* with Caucasians placing a greater emphasis on that variable. Table 19 reveals the data.

Table 19

*ANOVA - Dependent Variable: Quality of the Teaching Staff. Which of the Following Factors Were Important to You When Deciding Which Middle School to Select?*

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.509	5	.302	2.371	.044
Within Groups	13.624	107	.127		
Total	15.133	112			

*Multiple Comparisons Post Hoc Tukey Test - Dependent Variable: Quality of the Teaching Staff. Which of the Following Factors Were Important to You When Deciding Which Middle School to Select?*

Ethnicity	Ethnicity	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	Lower	Upper

White	African-American	.382	.119	.000	.04	.73
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Table 19 ANOVA reveals that with respect to the criteria *quality of the teaching staff*, there was an F-value of 2.371 with a 0.044 level of significance ( $p < 0.05$ ). There were no other statistically significant associations between ethnic groups where the  $N > 8$ .

Catalog Three reveals some responses strongly corresponding to, and connected with the ethno-racial background of the respondents. The responses are verbatim what was reported on the survey and may contain grammatical/syntax errors:

*Catalog Three*

“Renaissance seems to attract only rich white kids. Not as good prep for high school.”

“Schools should be better balanced racially and socio-economically.”

“Renaissance could definitely be more racially diverse than it is.”

Research Question Four: How is the middle school choice decision affected by the respondent’s socio-economic level?

Additional investigation into the data reveals that the indicator *quality of the teaching staff* was the most common important (greater than 75%) factor across all socio-economic parameters. In the group categorized as Medium SES, 88.9% of the respondents indicated that the *quality of the teaching staff* was an important factor. Also in the group classified as High

SES, 82.85 of the respondents acknowledged the *quality of the teaching staff* as an important factor influencing middle school choice.

In the Likert-type portion of the survey, the data revealed that respondents from all three socio-economic groups believe that the *quality of the teaching staff* is an important factor in selecting a middle school for their child. For Medium SES respondents, *quality of the teaching staff* had a mean score of 3.11 (standard deviation 0.47). For the High SES group, a mean score of 3.30 (standard deviation 0.56) was tallied. This data reveals that across the three different economic classifications, respondents believed that the *quality of the teaching staff* is a highly important factor influencing middle school choice.

Catalog Four reveals some responses strongly corresponding to, and connected with the socio-economic status of the respondents. The responses are verbatim what was reported on the survey and may contain grammatical/syntax errors:

#### *Catalog Four*

“Renaissance seems to attract only rich white kids. Not as good prep for high school.”

“Schools should be better balanced racially and socio-economically.”

“Renaissance could definitely be more socio-economically diverse than it is.”

#### Chapter Summary

The results of the *Survey of Middle School Choice* indicate that the primary factor influencing middle school choice is the perceived quality of the teaching staff. Secondary

factors influencing middle school choice are the quality of the administrations, perception of the school and specific magnet theme of the school.

This chapter was designed to provide an analysis of the data secured through the *Survey of Middle School Choice*. The results were compiled from 114 responses generated from the 250 surveys mailed to parents who had a fifth grade student enrolled in the Montclair Public Schools during the school year 2006-07. This large sample size represented a diverse collection of ethnicities and persons from various socio-economic clusters. It should be noted, however, that the surveys returned represented a self-selected sample. Additionally, the returned surveys were completed online using Seton Hall University's ASSET software. This may have presented a problem to potential respondents without internet access and/or computer skills. The 114 surveys completed represented a return rate of 46.1% and allowed for an accurate disaggregating of the data, presented in this chapter. Please note that in some cases, due to rounding, the total percentages do not equal one hundred. Moreover, during the process of disaggregating specific data, some sample sizes were smaller than 8 and were not reported to better protect confidentiality.

Additional statistical treatments and their results can be found in Appendix F. Included in this Appendix are all statistical analyses and data which were not determined to be statistically significant.



## Chapter V

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Purpose of the Study – Summary

The purpose of this study was to investigate and identify the pertinent factors affecting parental middle school choice in a diverse K-12 New Jersey school district with magnet schools and an intra-district controlled choice program. Researchers such as Hausman and Goldring (2000), have claimed that there are many reasons why parents, if afforded the opportunity, would choose one school over another. Some parents focus on what can be termed as academic indicators - test scores, class size, quality of the teaching staff and curriculum offerings - while other parents focus more on non-academic reasons such as the location of the school, diversity of the student body or the social atmosphere present in the building.

This study is designed to reveal the important variables involved in parents' choice decisions regarding middle school selection in a diverse K-12 magnet school district in Northern New Jersey, and use that knowledge base to improve the quality of the schools. At present there is a strong need for educators to identify factors that draw parents to a specific school or push parents away from a particular school. Once these pertinent variables are isolated and identified, the problem then allows educators to re-focus, and analyze how they (school leaders and stakeholders) can use this information to create exceptional schools that are in high demand.

## Theoretical Rationale - Summary

The theoretical rationale for this study is based primarily on the ideas that parents know their children best, know what constitutes a good or bad school and that, if given the opportunity, will decide to send their child to the best available school. Simultaneously, referred to as *utility value theory* or *rational choice theory*, it is hypothesized that if school choice was made public policy, schools would be forced to improve. Not necessarily out of some heightened sense of public responsibility, but rather out of their own economic self-interest, which has for some time proven itself to be the best motivator of all. Stated more succinctly, schools will make progress because their survival depends on them doing just that.

Public schools currently benefit organizationally, economically and politically, from the protection they are awarded as the sole public provider of an essential service. As economists Milton Friedman (1955), Thomas Sowell (2004) and Walter Williams (2005) have explained, monopolies are the most inefficient and least responsive type of organizations. School choice has surfaced as a simple solution to a complex problem. By shifting the power from the organization (school) to the consumer (parent), school choice provides parents, like all consumers, the opportunity to “vote with their feet” when selecting a school for their children (McCluskey, 2005).

Furthermore, there is a growing body of research that indicates when parents are able to choose their child’s schools, they become more satisfied with their chosen schools, as well as more involved in their child’s education (Hausman & Goldring, 2000). School choice therefore

has emerged not only as a way to improve student improvement, but also as a sure-fire method of improving parental satisfaction, an enduring concern among school administrators (Hoerr, 1989).

According to McCluskey (2005), a significant problem in American public schools today is that they operate in a non-competitive environment. Bolstered by compulsory attendance laws and absent from any meaningful competitors, schools enjoy a consistent and steady clientele (Gryphon & Meyer, 2003). Without competitive pressures to “get better or get out,” schools lack the outside pressure needed to sustain systemic improvement (Glenn, 1991).

This is in stark contrast to organizations existing in the private, for-profit environment. These organizations’ entire existence is dependent on delivering a product or service that the customers want at a price they are willing (and able) to pay. Public schools do not face anywhere near to a commensurate amount of pressure, and consequently do not operate nearly as efficiently as their counterparts in the competitive marketplace. School choice is a movement designed to mimic and reposition a significant portion of this pressure into the American public school system. The fact that school choice advocates are joined at the hip with voucher proponents and charter school supporters is not by accident; they represent different sides of the same theoretical coin.

Moreover, the American public school system was organized to educate masses of children to participate in the industrial marketplace as opposed to the global economy of the post-industrial age (Abbot, 1995; Egol, 1999). This “age of information” has brought new issues to the forefront, and consequently schools are currently struggling to churn out graduates that are able to fully participate in the new global marketplace (Slavin & Rifkin, 1996). Schools must find a way to meet and exceed the demands and concerns of parents, and prepare their children to compete in the competitive workforce of the coming century (Charp, 1995). The challenge is

therefore simple and straightforward; improve the quality of education that children receive in the public sector and do so using research-based practices consistent with efficient and well-organized fiscal management of public monies.

### Research Methodology - Summary

This dissertation project entitled *A Descriptive Study of the Factors Influencing Middle School Choice in a Diverse Magnet School District in Northern New Jersey* was specifically designed to integrate both quantitative as well as qualitative elements. The instrument - *Survey of Middle School Choice* - was designed to collect information which could be disaggregated and analyzed to deduce current trends and tendencies of parental choice within the Montclair Public Schools. The survey consisted of three parts. Part I, the questionnaire section, listed the prepared criteria, identified through existing studies and adapted to better fit the middle school population. Participants responded to these questions using multi-element checklists and Likert-type scales. Part II of the survey permitted respondents to provide open-ended responses to specific question constructs. Part III of the survey was fashioned to collect demographic information which would allow the researcher to disaggregate the data by gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status.

The researcher utilized ASSET (Academic Survey System and Evaluation Tool) software available at Seton Hall University. The respondents were sent a letter of solicitation which included a web address where they could complete the survey anonymously. The *Survey of Middle School Choice* was designed to take approximately 10 to 15 minutes. Out of 250 letters of solicitation mailed out, the researcher was able to use 114 completed and valid surveys. Used

in conjunction with SPSS 14.0, ASSET software enabled the researcher to disaggregate the data more expeditiously and in greater detail.

For the multi-choice element in the survey, respondents were directed to select from a bank of twelve indicators as to which of these factors influenced their middle school choice decision. If a factor was selected by 50% to 75% of the respondents, it was considered to be a fairly important indicator of middle school choice. If a factor was selected by over 75% of the respondents, it was considered to be a highly important indicator of middle school choice.

For the Likert-type portion of the survey, respondents were directed to select *Strongly Disagree*, *Disagree*, *Agree* or *Strongly Agree* to each of eighteen statements. *Strongly Disagree* was assigned a value of 1.0; *Disagree* was assigned a value of 2.0; *Agree* was assigned a value of 3.0 and *Strongly Agree* was assigned a value of 4.0. Statements with a mean score of 2.5 to 3.0 were considered to be fairly important indicators of middle school choice. Statements with a mean score of greater than 3.0 were considered to be highly important indicators of middle school choice.

Additionally, for the qualitative section (Part II) of the survey, respondents were asked to fill out open-ended questions related to middle school choice. These answers were collected, transcribed and analyzed for key terms strongly connected to one or more of the primary research questions.

### Implications of the Study - Summary

The policy implications of this study were discussed and analyzed for their potential impact on local, state and federal education policy. The concept of school choice appears to be

gaining strength at the grassroots level across the nation. According to Raham (1998), “There has never been a time in history of public education when parents have been so prepared to control the destiny of their child’s education.” Because the word *education* was purposely left out of the U. S. Constitution by the Founding Fathers, it has remained, since the Colonial era, a uniquely local phenomenon and taken on indigenous flavors and appearances. Since that time period, various states and local boards of education have sought to preserve much of this local control and some have even overtly resisted federal overtures, via *No Child Left Behind*, to seek greater control of the process and content of educational practices.

Utah, described as the, “reddest of states,” has vowed not to accept federal money attached to NCLB in an effort to remove their state from the requirements associated with the law (Ripley et al., 2005). Moreover, Nebraska, another solidly Republican state, has also agitated for reduced federal “micromanagement” and has campaigned loudly for the federal government to cease trampling on the storied tradition of “states rights” (Morse & Sieger, 2003). It appears very likely that the issue of who controls local education will continue to be problematic over the next few years. In this climate, school choice has emerged as fundamental to the debate over how to improve the American public education system.

Those in favor of local control believe that school choice will continue to offer parents and children increased control over the educational process, whereas those in favor of a stronger federal control, believe that school choice, at the very least, will introduce competitive pressures on underperforming schools. The policy implications are serious and deserving of further research.

Research Question One: What is the primary factor affecting middle school choice as made by fifth grade parents/caregivers before their children enter sixth grade at one of three magnet middle schools in a diverse K-12 public school district in Northern New Jersey?

Examination of the survey results indicate that the primary factor influencing middle school choice in Montclair, New Jersey for the school year 2007-2008 is the *quality of the teaching staff*. This primary factor cuts across all ethnic, gender and socio-economic groupings and is a significant predictor of middle school choice. In short, if the parents perceive that the teaching staff of one school is considerably superior to the teaching staff of other schools, then that will be the decisive element in the middle school choice process.

Research Question Two: What are other factors affecting middle school choice as made by fifth grade parents/caregivers before their children enter sixth grade at one of three magnet middle schools in a diverse K-12 public school district in Northern New Jersey?

Secondary factors influencing middle school choice are *perception of the school, magnet theme of the school* and the *quality of the administration*. These factors, again, cut across ethnic, gender and socio-economic classifications and either separately, or in concert, are able to integrate their forces to influence middle school choice decisions made by parents/caregivers and their children.

Research Question Three: How is the middle school choice decision affected by the respondent's ethno-racial background?

As mentioned previously, the most important factor influencing middle school choice is the *quality of the teaching staff*. This factor was the most important predictor in all ethnic groups. In summation, parents in all ethnic groups controlled for, believe that the quality of the teaching staff is the most important factor when deciding which middle school their child will attend.

Research Question Four: How is the middle school choice decision affected by the respondent's socio-economic level?

The most significant factor influencing middle school choice is the *quality of the teaching staff*. This factor was the most important predictor in all socio-economic groups. Parents in all socio-economic groups and from each of the six sending elementary schools/three receiving middle schools believe that the quality of the teaching staff is the most important factor when deciding which middle school their child will attend.

#### Comparison to Previous Research - Summary

Prior research on the subject of parental choice options at both the elementary and secondary level indicate that there are various factors that influence parental choice decisions. Existing studies such as Howell (2006), Bagley (2006), Viaden (2007) and Levine-Rasky (2007)



indicate that the overall culture and perception of the school plays a vital role in these decisions. In addition, there is a growing body of research (Bell, 2007; Bagley, 2006) that supposes location is the primary factor affecting the parents' final school choice decision. Moreover, Viaden (2007) considers the thematic focus (magnet theme) of the school to be one of the more important variables factoring into the school choice decision-making process.

### Conclusion – Discussion and Implications

According to the *Survey of Middle School Choice*, the primary factor influencing the middle school choice decision is the quality of the teaching staff. This affirms much of the research detailed earlier in Chapter II. All three middle schools in Montclair (Glenfield, Mount Hebron and Renaissance) align themselves around the concept of team teaching. Middle schools that are prearranged around the concept of the team-teaching approach achieve more; they have superior student attendance and fewer disciplinary problems than middle schools that do not use the team or house approach (Pounder, 1998). In addition, the use of “teaming” was found to be beneficial to adolescent development as well as high achievement scores (McEwin, Greene, & Jenkins, 2001). Middle schools generally use this team approach to, “integrate subjects into broader themes” (Scales, 1993). Two of the Montclair Magnet Middle Schools (Glenfield and Mount Hebron) also utilize the concept of “looping,” which keeps students and teachers together for grades six-seven-eight.

All three middle schools in Montclair qualify as magnet schools as they meet the four criteria listed earlier in the literature review: 1. A unique method of instruction; 2. Admissions procedures that facilitate desegregation efforts; 3. Choice options for families; and 4. Access for

students across neighborhood attendance precincts (Hausman and Brown, 2002). Additionally, the three magnet middle schools in Montclair all rely on students voluntarily crossing neighborhood attendance zones to attend the specific school (Maddaus, 1988). The *Survey of Middle School Choice* affirms the importance of the magnet theme as all groups (ethnic, socio-economic, and gender) controlled for, indicated that the specific magnet theme of the middle school of choice was a significant factor influencing their decision.

According to the National Middle School Association (2003), high-achieving middle schools depend, in part, on “courageous and collaborative leadership.” Supplementary research indicates that in high-achieving middle schools, the instructional leader sets lofty standards for staff, students as well as parents (Cooney, Moore, & Bottoms, 2002). This also supports the data gathered from the *Survey of Middle School Choice*. The quality of the administration emerged as an element integral to the middle school choice process. Disaggregated data from various ethnic groups, gender groups and socio-economic levels revealed the importance of this variable.

This study is designed to reveal the significant variables involved in parents’ choice decisions and use that knowledge base to concurrently improve the quality of the schools. In view of that, educators need to identify factors that draw parents to a specific school or push parents away from a particular school. Once the relevant variables are identified, school leaders must use this information to create top quality schools that are in high demand.

To maintain “market share”, schools would have to be responsive to demand and develop innovative curricular offerings (Robenstine, 2000). School districts that do not offer choice are said to enjoy a monopoly over their constituents. It bears noting that an overwhelmingly high percentage of school districts in New Jersey, as well as the United States, do not offer any form of school choice. By far, ‘school choice’ districts are the exception to the status quo of

monopoly. These entrenched and static interests wish to persuade legislators to write laws to exclude new market entrants and deter competition (Walberg, 2000). Lessening the number of available choices for parents and students will indisputably diminish the competitive pressures on the remaining schools (McCluskey, 2005; St. John & Ridenour, 2001).

According to Hill (1999), school choice both excites and enflames passions around the country. It is expressed in diverse appearances, yet defined in exclusive terms that paint either a positive or negative portrait (Raham, 1998). Proponents believe that choice will account for improved school productivity and increase the opportunities for low-income families to access high-quality education (Hill, 1999; Hausman & Brown, 2002). It has become somewhat of a *cause célèbre* among activists advocating for families not able to pay private school tuition for their children.

In addition to amplified levels of parent's involvement, research indicates that parent satisfaction increased when school choice programs were implemented in Milwaukee (Witte, 1996) and San Antonio (Martinez et al., 1996). Moreover, it appears that parents able to exercise school choice options are more likely to be dedicated to improving the culture of the school. According to Comer and Poussaint, (1992), Lynn (1997) and Mapp (1997), family involvement in education is correlated with student academic achievement and other propitious educational outcomes.

Using the *Survey of Middle School Choice*, the researcher was able to discover multiple factors that influence parents' middle school choice decision. The primary factor appears to be the *quality of the teaching staff* whereas supplementary factors have been identified as: the *perception of the school*, the *magnet theme of the school* and the *quality of the administration*. Together, in concert, these factors hold the answer to the questions, "Why do parents select a

particular middle school for their child?” and “Why do parents not select a particular middle school for their child?”

## Recommendations

### *Implications for Practice*

Stemming from this research are practical implications sufficient enough for middle school educators to affect change in their respective schools. According to the *Survey of Middle School Choice*, the primary indicator of middle school choice is the quality of the teaching staff. Secondary indicators include the quality of the administration, perception of the school and magnet theme of the school.

Researchers may wish to replicate this study with a more focused approach on developing more intimate researcher-participant relationships. Namely, it might be beneficial to include focus groups, or even one-on-one interviews for a more in-depth dialogue on the topic of factors affecting middle school choice among parents. The subtle shift in methodology, making the study more qualitative, is important, as it simplifies the process of identifying and categorizing the pertinent factors affecting middle school choice.

Furthermore, these focus groups would enable the dialogue between researcher and respondents to become more meaningful and multi-layered. Participants would have the opportunity to provide information not easily integrated into a Likert-type survey. Moreover, using a more qualitative approach, the researcher would have the opportunity to ask follow-up questions and begin to gather information on a more expressive level.

Of the three middle schools in Montclair (Glenfield, Mt. Hebron, and Renaissance), it appears that parents sending their child to Glenfield completed the surveys at a much higher rate. As mentioned previously, the researcher also serves as the Principal of Glenfield Middle School and it remains distinctly possible that this impacted the return rate of surveys.

### *Implications for Policy*

This study has significant implications for central office administrators, middle school principals and teachers, as well as for parents and students. After disaggregating the data, it became apparent that across the board, the most important factor influencing middle school choice was the quality of the teaching staff. The policy implications derived from this study indicate a strong need for schools and school districts to focus their school improvement efforts on that factor. The need for solid professional development activities and forward thinking professional development philosophies has never been greater. Myopic approaches, stop-gap advances and piecemeal methodologies would appear to not have any significant impact on staff improvement. The outcomes from the *Survey of Middle School Choice* are clear: parents look for quality teachers over every other variable, in some cases they seek quality teachers over all other variables *put together*.

These policy implications are pertinent outside of Montclair as well. Although Montclair has a thirty-year head start in developing magnet schools and school choice programs, it would appear to most rational observers that the issues involving school choice and racial diversity will continue to expand. Census data hints at America becoming more diverse in future years.

Whether in an urban, suburban or rural setting, middle level educators, in their school improvement efforts, should begin to attempt to replicate these findings on a local level

### Future Research

Future research might be conducted on a statewide or national level. This study provides a “snapshot” of factors affecting middle school choice in Montclair, New Jersey during the school year 2006-07. The climate as determined by the Board of Education and Superintendent within any particular district may very well reflect regional concerns and/or issues present at a given moment in time.

These differences would not be explained and could be quite significant in a single district study such as this one. The survey could easily be modified to account for participants responding from different school districts as well as different states. Also, identifying respondents from other regions might present other opportunities for researchers to identify and connect concerns affecting middle school choice across the nation.

Moreover, the demographics section of the survey could be altered in impending studies. With an estimated (2005) household median income of \$82,400, Montclair is well above both state and national averages in that category. Also well above state and national averages is the estimated (2005) median house value of \$569,800. Specifically, the demographics segment where respondents selected a socio-economic level for their families could be broadened. Out of 114 valid surveys, 93 (82.3%) were categorized as High SES, 18 (15.9%) were categorized as Medium SES and only 2 (1.8%) were classified as Low SES. The categories were, perhaps, clustered too close together, not allowing for better disaggregation of the data provided. For

more substantive results, it becomes imperative to increase levels of participation from respondents in the Low SES category.

Furthermore, it might be prudent to incorporate an opportunity for respondents to register their primary feeder school (Grade Five Elementary School) somewhere on the survey. Trends might be discovered that would be helpful to both middle school educators as well as elementary school educators. This could provide future research with additional prospects to mine for significant data.

Also, in future studies, the researcher could be able to eliminate the questions related to having older children/siblings in a middle school. There were very few responses that indicated that there was even an older child/sibling and, of that subgroup, even fewer indicated that having an older sibling/child at all influenced their choice decision. Without making the survey any longer, future research would be better off using the space in the survey to dig for more significant data related to quality of the teaching staff, perception of the school, magnet theme, et cetera. Also, it might be prudent to include survey questions about the relative importance of school safety issues. In the *Survey of Middle School Choice*, respondents had the option of listing school safety issues in the open-ended question section, but there were no Likert-type questions specifically about this issue. Future research would benefit from investigating this topic in greater detail.

Future studies might incorporate a longitudinal aspect and examine the academic performance of children in their chosen middle schools. Following students for a period of three years (Grades 6-8) or four years (Grades 9-12) to determine if a middle school of choice has any significant impact on student academic achievement would be a positive development in this field. These longitudinal studies might increase the base of knowledge in this particular area and

allow educators to further identify and isolate pertinent factors affecting student academic achievement during their middle school years. Accordingly, local administrators could use this information to improve grade level articulation between and among teachers, parents and school leaders at all grade levels within the district.

Moreover, future research could examine factors related to school safety, as anecdotal evidence points to the increasing numbers of parents concerned with issues linked with school safety. Researchers could study these issues and determine whether or not they rise to levels of importance similar to teacher quality, magnet theme or quality of the administration. In post-9/11 America, it appears to be highly unlikely that school safety issues will disappear completely from the landscape.

Finally, future researchers should connect their investigation into various aspects of federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation. Since its passage in 2002, a research base has been built up and specific elements of the legislation are already in place. Future studies could examine the impact NCLB has had on parental middle school choice. Specifically, the choice elements that become perceptible when a school or district has failed to meet its Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and is in need of “restructuring.” Future researchers could examine the impact such a designation has on a particular school or district, and whether or not it has any meaningful impact on student achievement.



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## Appendix A

### Reliability of Analysis

#### *Reliability Coefficients*

Number of Cases (N) = 60

Number of Items (N) = 16

#### *Scale: Alpha*

Alpha = 0.6107

Appendix B

Letters of Approval

March 1, 2007

Alex Anemone  
Glenfield Middle School  
25 Maple Ave.  
Montclair, NJ 07042

Dear Mr. Anemone:

You have my permission to conduct the research phase of your dissertation project within the Montclair Public School District. It is my understanding that your research proposal focuses on the criteria used for middle school selection and preferences among parents/caregivers in a diverse magnet school district such as Montclair. Moreover, I understand that your study has been approved by the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and that proper measures have been taken to guarantee the anonymity of the respondents.

Sincerely,

Dr. Frank Alvarez,  
Superintendent of Schools

January 31, 2007

Glenfield Middle School  
25 Maple Ave.  
Montclair, NJ 07042

Dr. Adunni Anderson  
Principal, Edgemont Montessori School  
20 Edgemont Road  
Upper Montclair, NJ 07043

Dear Dr. Anderson:

As an administrator in the Montclair Public Schools, I am interested in researching the topic of middle school choice as it is relevant in a diverse K-12 district in Northern New Jersey. Your research is of interest to me and I would like to have your approval and blessing to utilize, in part, your survey instrument in a study to be conducted later this year.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to contact me directly, please do not hesitate to call at 973-509-4171 or email at [AAnemone@Montclair.k12.nj.us](mailto:AAnemone@Montclair.k12.nj.us)

Sincerely,

Alex Anemone

Principal, Glenfield Middle School

## Appendix C

### Letter of Solicitation

Dear Parent/Caregiver of a 2006-07 Fifth Grade Student:

My name is Alex Anemone and I am the principal of Glenfield Visual and Performing Arts Magnet Middle School. In addition, I am also a doctoral student in the Graduate School of Education at Seton Hall University. My research is under the direct supervision of Dr. Michael Osnato.

As a parent/caregiver of a 2006-2007 fifth grade student in the Montclair Public Schools, you have been carefully selected to participate in this survey. You have most recently gone through the process of registering a child in one of the three magnet middle schools in Montclair. The purpose of this survey is to analyze the factors influencing parents as they select from among these three magnet middle schools in Montclair. This survey can be taken online using Seton Hall University's ASSET (Academic Survey System and Evaluation Tool) software, and should take no more than ten (10) minutes. Directions are as follows:

1. Log on to <http://asset.tlhc.shu.edu/surveys/middleschoolchoice>
2. Sign in as *guest*
3. Complete survey anonymously

The online survey, *Survey of Middle School Choice*, attempts to reveal the factors taken into consideration by parents/caregivers when selecting a magnet middle school in Montclair. The survey consists of three parts. Part I requires answers to a questionnaire and calls for you to circle the appropriate response on a four-point rating scale, based on which response most likely fits your personal experience. Part II consists of open-ended questions allowing the respondent to provide as much information as they wish to share. Part III is designed to allow for demographic and background information.

I hope that you will take the time to complete this survey but please understand that it is completely voluntary. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study or withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice. By completing the survey, you indicate your consent to participate in the study.

All data from this study will be reported anonymously or in aggregate form without attribution to any individual. Your anonymity will be preserved as no names are included or requested anywhere on the online survey.

The data gathered is password protected and will be stored on the Seton Hall University server. It will be retained for a period of three years at which point it will be deleted. If you have any questions about the conduct of this study, please feel free to contact me at 973-509-4171 or my mentor, Dr. Michael Osnato (973-761-2853) in the Graduate Education offices at Seton Hall University.

Sincerely,

Alex Anemone

Appendix D

Survey of Middle School Choice

*Introduction*

There are many different reasons why parents/caregivers choose to send their children to a particular middle school. This survey is designed to investigate these reasons and, after careful analysis, provide beneficial feedback to further improve the instructional process at the middle school level as well as improve the perception of the district as a whole. Your input as a district stakeholder is crucial to the success of this study. This survey will take approximately 5 to 10 minutes to complete and all answers will be kept in strict confidence. You do not need to provide your name on this survey. Please review each item and answer as best as you can using the listed Likert-type scale, and return in the self-addressed stamped envelope. If you have any questions, please contact Alex Anemone at 973-509-4171 or [AAanemone@Montclair.k12.nj.us](mailto:AAanemone@Montclair.k12.nj.us)

*Part I - Survey*

1. Which of the following factors were important to you when deciding which middle school to select? (check all that apply)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Location of the school           | <input type="checkbox"/> Size of the school        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Length of instructional day      | <input type="checkbox"/> Magnet theme              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Standardized test scores         | <input type="checkbox"/> Perception of school      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Quality of teaching staff        | <input type="checkbox"/> Diversity of student body |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Quality of administration        | <input type="checkbox"/> Diversity of staff        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Older sibling currently enrolled | <input type="checkbox"/> Older sibling graduated   |

**SD-Strongly Disagree      D-Disagree      A-Agree      SA-Strongly Agree**

2. I chose this middle school because of its location.

SD    D    A    SA

3. I chose this middle school because of its size.

SD    D    A    SA

4. I chose this middle school because of the start/finish time of the instructional day.

SD    D    A    SA

5. I chose this middle school because of its unique magnet theme.

SD    D    A    SA

6. I chose this middle school due to the fact that I have an older child currently in that middle school.

SD    D    A    SA

7. I chose this middle school due to the fact that I had an older child already graduate from that school.

SD    D    A    SA

8. I chose this middle school because my older child had a positive experience in that school.

SD    D    A    SA

9. I chose this middle school due to the overall positive perception of this middle school.

SD    D    A    SA

10. I chose this middle school because of its nurturing culture.

SD    D    A    SA

**SD-Strongly Disagree      D-Disagree    A-Agree      SA-Strongly Agree**

11. I chose this middle school because of the quality of the administration.

SD    D    A    SA

12. I chose this middle school because of the quality of the teaching staff

SD    D    A    SA

13. I chose this middle school due to its state standardized test scores.

SD    D    A    SA



14. I chose this middle school because of the co-curricular activities offered.

SD    D    A    SA

15. I chose this middle school due to opportunities to participate via the PTA (Parent Teacher-Association).

SD    D    A    SA

16. I chose this middle school due to opportunities to participate via the School Review Team.

SD    D    A    SA

17. I chose this middle school because many of my child's peers decided to attend.

SD    D    A    SA

18. I chose this middle school because my child seems to "fit in" there.

SD    D    A    SA

19. I chose this middle school with my child's input.

SD    D    A    SA

20. I chose the following middle school:

a. Glenfield    b. Mt. Hebron    c. Renaissance    d. private school

*Part II – Open-Ended Responses*

Please answer the following questions as completely as possible. All responses will be absolutely confidential. If you need additional space, please attach a piece of paper.

1.     What other factor(s), not mentioned, helped you decide which middle school to send your child to?

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2. What was the most important factor that influenced your decision to send your child to a particular middle school?

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3. What was your overall perception of the middle school selection process?

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4. What could be done by the district/individual schools to improve the selection process?

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*Part III - Demographics*

1. What is the gender of your child?

male       female

2. What is the ethnic code of your child?

Asian/Pacific Islander       Hispanic

Bi-Racial/Multi-Racial       Black/African American

White       Other

3. What annual income range is closest to your total household level?

Less than \$49,999

\$50,000 - \$99,999

Greater than \$100,000

## Appendix E

### Part II - Transcribed Open-Ended Responses

Please note: transcribed responses to survey questions four through seven are reproduced verbatim and may contain grammatical, spelling or syntax errors. To assemble this section as authentically as possible, responses were reproduced exactly as inputted on the survey.

Question Four: What other factor(s), not mentioned, helped you decide where to send your child to middle school? 88 responses

Frequency	Text
1	--
1	40 minute periods instead of 80 minute blocks; large choice of electives; had an older child at a different middle school - wanted a different experience for this different child.
1	After school programs, which sadly have been changed/reduced from when our oldest attended the last 3 years. These programs gave our oldest a chance to engage in areas of interest that she would have felt uncomfortable participating in as an course for grade -- she need the freedom of not working for a grade.
1	After touring the other schools my son just felt at home in Glenfield. It was most like his elementary school. The new admin. seems strong right now - we were exposed to them as both teachers and administrators.
1	All the factors we considered are mentioned above, so there were no additional factors.
1	Although my children do not have an older child who previously attended/graduated from this middle school, they do have a cousin who currently attends this middle school. I also attended the tour/open house.
1	Atmosphere seemed very student-centered and creative. I saw evidence of projects that engaged students in critical thinking. The open vs. closed houses offered an opportunity for the needs of diverse learners. Administration and teachers very warm to visitors and seem genuinely excited about teaching. This is the only school that provides opportunities for string players. I felt that my daughter would not only get a substantive education but that she could develop her musicianship as well.
1	Availability of very accelerated math--in 6th grade, my daughter is taking algebra, which would not be available to her at Renaissance until 8th grade.
1	Child's interest in career.
1	Comfort and confidence with Mr. Anemone.
1	Continuity of teachers in the House system for the three years.

1	Continuity with the type of school she attended in prior years.
1	Core academics centeredness.
1	Daylight within the building, or lack thereof, was important - to me, not of importance to my son. I found Mt Hebron very gloomy and was pleased that another option was available.
1	Elementary school's perception and recommendation of the school by its staff.
1	Experiences of other parents whose children had already attended Montclair middle schools; my child's preference.
1	Glenfield has an excellent reputation for providing a superlative academic experience.
1	Glenfield's reputation as a nurturing place where my child would grow emotionally and academically strongly encouraged me to choose Glenfield. I also spoke with parents of other children who had attended Glenfield. They strongly influenced my decision in a positive manner. I ignored rumors and negative comments from people who did not have children who attended Glenfield but who expressed a negative opinion anyway based on rumors around town.
1	Hillside feeds into Glenfield so my student is well prepared to participate in the schedule.
1	I didn't want the school day to end too late, because of the amount of homework students get. I wanted time for homework to be finished before any additional activities and still have family time in the evening. I also liked the fact that the teachers moved with the students.
1	I feel middle school is a time when children have the opportunity to try many electives with good or bad results without fear of hurting their GPA. Glenfield is the school that offers the most and most varied elective choices.
1	I had an older child who attended Mt. Hebron and she somehow got "lost" in the shuffle as she did not have continuity in the "house" system.
1	I have a child who just finished 8th grade at Glenfield. While she loved the school from day one, I felt that the school was not run well for the first two years she was there, and I would not have allowed my second child to attend Glenfield if it had not changed. However, the new principal/assistant principal team improved communications between the school and parents, and it seemed that they encouraged more communications between teachers and parents as well. To me, the whole atmosphere of the school seemed improved. I was very pleased with the changes.
1	I have two older children who attended the school. I was unhappy with the sense of community at the school, the lack of communication from school administration and staff, and the limited choices for electives.
1	I let my child decide which school she wanted to attend.
1	I liked that each class was just 40 minutes. Mt. Hebron uses block scheduling

	and 80 minutes is too long for a child to sit and very few teachers can be engaging for that length of time.
1	I liked that there were no houses, so if my son wasn't in class with one of his friends in the school, they could still discuss the homework. I like that there were no electives, so you were exposed to classes that you might not have chosen yourself. I liked that my son would not have the same teachers for three years.
1	I liked the small nurturing environment and the principle.
1	I preferred the longer periods and the smaller school feel of Mt. Hebron.
1	I strongly believe Glenfield Middle school was the right choice for my child because of the strong community that exists within the school and the many opportunities academically and Visual Arts.
1	I was impressed with the staff, at the choice of school nights, they each told a story of them selves.
1	It is the feeder school for my child.
1	It was the feeder school and it's her preference. I think the teaching staff at all the schools is good.
1	It was the natural progression from elementary school which had worked well for my child. It was exciting, innovative and "out-of-the-box".
1	Love the emphasis on independent and critical thinking, ethics and social action. We very much wanted our third child to have "the Renaissance experience." We were most interested in a program that would challenge and support him.
1	Many of my child's friends are actually attending a different school and I felt a separation may be healthy.
1	most important is the (perceived) quality of teaching staff and the quality of communication/responsiveness between teachers and parent(myself).
1	Music program The fact that my child had such a positive experience with Hillside having gone to Watching Elementary for Kindergarten through 2nd grade.
1	My child applied to another middle school, but was wait-listed. Consequently, the choice was made for him to attend Glenfield.
1	My child can walk around outside during the day for gym, recess, other activities. Integrated curriculum, focus on writing. Ultimately we are working parents and couldn't imagine our child being done at 2pm, and not being able to go outside at Glenfield were both factors in our difficult decision. We were drawn to both schools. It was a tough call for us between Glenfield and Renaissance. Our child had been in a large elementary school. We thought it would be important to also have a small school experience. I, Myself, loved school. But I have mixed and some unpleasant memories of my own junior high school experience and this colored my decision. The awkwardness of early adolescence I remember all too clearly and I thought Renaissance would be a better place to go through puberty. Being mental health professionals also

	colored our decision. As much as I loved Glenfield and all it has to offer, I felt Renaissance was an emotionally safer place to go through puberty. We also felt that our child flitted around with so many friends, but not many really good friends. We thought it would be easier for her to make long term friendships in the smaller more intimate environment of Renaissance.
1	My child felt very strongly about this school.
1	My child had a strong preference for this school.
1	My child has difficulty academically, so I wanted her to experience success throughout the day in the arts to help foster self-esteem.
1	My child initiated the interest in Mt. Hebron. I personally wanted her to go to Glenfield but her interest in Mt. Hebron prompted us to investigate both and ultimately selecting Mt. Hebron.
1	My kids have gone through Nishuane & Hillside with very good experiences, and Glenfield continues those themes. Also a neighbor teaches there & had good things to say. And I heard a few bad things about Mt. Hebron. And I liked Mr. Anemone from Hillside days... But at the end of the day, it's really just a gut decision....
1	My son attended Hillside, and we knew how effective Mr. Anemone was as an administrator.
1	My son is artistic and has a lot of interest so we like the many electives at Glenfield. I also thought the 80 minute periods at Mt. Hebron would be too long for his attention span. Renaissance is too small. Also, he has a brother one grade ahead that it's best he not be competing directly with.
1	My son liked it the most after visiting all 3 public middle schools.
1	Note - no siblings, so questions about siblings do not apply.
1	Our child researched all options, provided his reasons for wanting to attend Glenfield. We thought his reasons were valid and agreed to his choice.
1	over potential for accelerated math ( skip 6th grade).
1	Overall positive environment.
1	Positive atmosphere, positive energy.
1	Previous child's experience at Mt Hebron, which was good but several of the better teachers were leaving.
1	Quality of Administration.
1	Renaissance seems to attract only rich white kids. Not as good prep for high school.
1	Rogate, Algebra, Geometry, CI classes, art, dance and drama opportunities. More choice in general. Although I have been very disappointed that the "gifted" theme does not extend to everyday classes- only to CIs. "Differentiated instruction" is a phrase central office uses to get us parents off their backs but provide NOTHING for the child. BOE says they are training the teachers and the teachers say they

	are not getting training in differentiated instruction. The result is my child will often be bored in math class. SAIL is a piece of paper saying your child is in SAIL and nothing else.
1	safety/ability to go outside.
1	Social reputation of students (e.g. Glenfield's rep is for "faster"/more mature students).
1	Strong creative arts program- strong instrumental program.
1	Student body does not seem as "sophisticated" as Glenfield.
1	The broad selection of extra curriculum activities.
1	The class sizes "looked" smaller on tour. The early school days are easier if we don't have to use the bus, school is close.
1	The electives the school offers, the daily schedule and that a foreign language is part of every students daily schedule.
1	The facility is excellent.
1	the fact that this school are more focused in math and sciences.
1	The feeling I got when I was in the school.
1	The Glenfield house system. I find it a great strength that my child and we, as parents, are able to establish a long-term relationship. It seems to enhance the teachers' individual attention to students and their strengths, weaknesses, and personal issues.
1	The hours were impossible at Renaissance and the word is that the MHS teachers think the writing of its graduates is terrible; when I visited Glenfield, it was manic and there were fistfights going on in the halls.
1	The House system--teachers get to know students well. Offerings in music. Offering in advanced academics, especially math. All of the choices available to the individual students. Fantastic offerings in the arts.
1	The interdisciplinary nature of the curriculum and the interesting and relevant field trips. The many electives and enrichment type classes offered and block scheduling.
1	The other middle schools did not appeal to my child.
1	The recent experience of older neighborhood children at the school.
1	The school has a strong administration now and I know that both the Principal and the Assistant Principal will make sure that every child will get a terrific education while attending Glenfield.
1	The scope of the opportunities in the arts - dance, music, visual arts. Opportunities for SAIL students.
1	The size being big enough to accommodate twins.
1	The variety of courses offered and the house system.
1	the variety of electives offered, positive reviews by friends whose children have



	gone through middle school.
1	There was an energy and an excitement to Glenfield that I didn't see anywhere else. The administration and the teachers seemed genuinely excited to be there.
1	This might be under the above heading of "perception of school" but I wanted to add that Glenfield has a certain dynamic energy of sparkling creativity that is attractive and is not present in the same way at the other schools.
1	This school was the continuation of a concept to which my child is already accustomed: the CI Magnet Theme. She felt comfortable with this school and wanted to attend.
1	This school was the natural progression from Hillside Middle School. It also seems to have the best reputation for keeping students engaged in their coursework. I also like the fact that my child will have the same 'team' of teachers throughout the 3 years at Glenfield.
1	To a small extent, the physical condition of the school (Renaissance is a dump.)
1	Variety of advanced classes offered.
1	We liked the principal.
1	We've wanted our child to attend Renaissance since she was a toddler. Unfortunately, our choice was not granted. The theme of this school mirrors the way we are raising our child.
1	weak administration at Mt. Hebron, poor quality of physical plant at Renaissance, length of school day at Renaissance.
1	what the "feeling" of the school was when visiting -- Glenfield students seemed positive and energetic.
1	When visiting the school we chose the kids appeared to be alert and actively engaged, and it seemed were being encouraged to think "outside of the box". The core teachers were a major factor in its favor but the arts program seemed weak. For our daughter, the small size and general atmosphere were important factors. She commented that the teachers seemed to be more upbeat than at the other schools, and she got the impression that they liked and respected the kids.

Question Five: What was the most important factor that influenced your decision to send your child to a particular middle school? 102 responses

Frequency	Text
1	The vibrant and positive energy we got from the school helped us decide.
1	'Fit' was most important, i.e., that my child feels enthusiastic about going to whichever school was chosen. In any of the three schools, he would receive a solid education, but developing a sense of spirit about his chosen school will

	hopefully give him a fuller experience that carries forward to high school.
1	"fit" with the child's personality/ability.
1	After touring all 3 public middle schools, Glenfield seemed to be the best fit for our son. So far this is true.
1	Arts Magnet theme.
1	At this point the location was a factor - the school is in walking distance and that limited certain potential problems.
1	Because my child is musical, it was important to me to send him to a school that gave him the most musical opportunities.
1	block scheduling - my perception is that kids in this age group have been attention-span/concentration-challenged since the dawn of time; they are not helped by IM'g, channel-switching remotes, txt-msg'g etc.
1	Child's career interest.
1	Curriculum balance across standard classes vs. across 'arts' classes.
1	Electives and shorter class periods.
1	electives offered.
1	Emphasis on core curriculum.
1	Experience with my older child.
1	Facilities! We loved what was on offer in the music program. Looks like fun and these options simply were not available at the other two schools.
1	Focus on the arts without sacrificing other academic areas.
1	From an educational perspective, having core courses five days a week, rather than alternating block scheduling, will be better for my child's learning style. However, the most important factor was that my child felt that she would fit in at this school, and she did not like the environment at either of the other two schools.
1	General approval of Montclair school system led me to be comfortable with choosing Glenfield, the school to which most Hillside kids go.
1	Gut feel - see key factors above.
1	He had come up through Ishuane and Hillside and benefited greatly from the Creative I/aesthetics program.
1	Her desire to attend Glenfield was the most important reason and her opinion was based on her sister having a positive experience. That positive experience included having support for our family dynamic (we are a gay family). She was also influenced by the wide variety of elective courses (even if you take out the arts classes as neither of my 2 children are into the drama, music, arts).
1	her intense desire to go there.
1	High quality of teaching staff and walking distance to home.
1	Hillside is feeder school - friends are attending as well.

1	His desire after completing the tours.
1	Honestly, I tried not to over think the whole thing. When I was a kid everyone just went to the same school. Unless there were extenuating (?) circumstances (academic, social etc.) then as long as the admin. Was in a good place (successful, not struggling) then we were satisfied.
1	I felt he would thrive here. A good fit.
1	I let my child choose. I wanted her to be invested in the school; the decision was entirely up to her. I felt there was no "bad" choice in Montclair.
1	I liked the size of the school and the lack of a magnet theme, which I feel can pigeonhole the child as only artistic or only interested in science.
1	I liked the way Glenfield worked and the length of the periods. The longer periods would be hard for my child, and as an educator, I know only very skilled teachers can handle and keep students interested for so long. I wanted my child home earlier also, so that ruled out the other middle school.
1	I wanted my child to have a large selection of peers to choose from.
1	It's house system, the strong arts program, the staff and administration.
1	Largely it was my child's choice.
1	location, my child's opinion, and perceived quality of educational opportunities were all influential:
1	Magnet theme.
1	Magnet theme and administration, equally.
1	Many of his peers were attending.
1	Mr. Adam Scribner, science teacher.
1	Music and Arts program- Reputation of the quality of the school.
1	My child "shadowed" a student and liked the teachers and the feeling in the classrooms.
1	My child and I both agreed that it was the best place for him.
1	My child felt very strongly about wanting to attend Glenfield, largely because it resembled her elementary school in structure of the day, courses offered, and emphasis on the arts.
1	My child is heavily involved in the performing arts; I wanted her to be able to go to a school with a very good performing arts program but also a school that would keep her on track academically.
1	My child wanted to attend this particular school.
1	My child's desire to go there.
1	My child's interest in the Magnet theme and co-curricular activities.
1	My child's preference for a middle school with a strong music program was the number one factor influencing my decision to send her to Glenfield.
1	My child's preference.

1	My children's input influenced my decision. They really wanted to attend Glenfield Middle School. After looking at test scores I could not see any reason to force them into going to another middle school.
1	My child's input.
1	My child's reaction to the school while attending a tour of the school.
1	My daughter wanted very much to attend this school.
1	My daughter's input and the magnet theme.
1	My daughter's opinion.
1	My older child's positive experience, and my familiarity with the curriculum and administration, was the most important factors influencing my decision.
1	My older son has attended 6th and 7th grade at Glenfield and 8th grade at Renaissance. He told me that Glenfield is a much better school, and that the teachers were better. He is a very good student.
1	My son really wanted to go to the school that his sisters attended. It is within walking distance to our home. Because the children move as a homeroom and because of the block scheduling, the school has a "small school" feel. My oldest daughter had wonderful teachers. Both of my daughters made good friends. Both did well in school.
1	Not feeling overwhelmed by the "fast" social environment of Glenfield or stifled by the themed-based learning at Renaissance.
1	Older sibling went.
1	older sibling's experience and magnet theme.
1	Our child has strong analytical and critical skills which we felt would be enhanced by the intimate and unconventional environment at Renaissance.
1	Our eldest daughter's success, as well, as the other positive comments from other parents district-wide. Also the appointment of Anemone and Rhaney last year. We were VERY disappointed with the prior year's management of the school. Anemone and Rhaney have added a HUGE level of confidence in that our child is safe there.
1	overall feeling and culture of the school.
1	Peer relationships and quality of programs.
1	Perception that child would get a good education.
1	proximity to home/ability to walk to school w/in own community.
1	Quality of Administration; Challenging Curriculum.
1	Quality of education as well as an atmosphere of acceptance and inclusion of all children. We like that the children participate in all classes, which creates a less competitive atmosphere, and encourages children to try new things and not get stuck with a particular self image.
1	Quality of teachers and staff and the many choices offered.

1	Quality of the administration.
1	Quality perception of the staff (teachers and administrative), and the music program.
1	Reputation of the staff.
1	Room for the kids to make creative choices and pursue interesting subjects, both in academic areas and music. Mr. Ward and Mr. Scribner!
1	School appeared to have balance of artistic and core curriculum. Students seemed to like the school and looked more involved.
1	Since I think all the schools are good, and this is her preference, I allowed her to choose.
1	Our daughter was so excited after attending the open house at Renaissance that she could not stop talking about it for weeks. I can't begin to tell you our disappointment that she was not chosen to attend.
1	Size.
1	Size, arts curricula and being with their friends.
1	size, environment, start time.
1	students high level of engagement in classes at Glenfield.
1	the above stated response (#4) and my older son's very positive experience in a specific House.
1	The alignment of my child's interest in the arts with the availability of these courses and opportunities. Academics are not his strong suit.
1	The amazing teachers and unique curriculum. At Renaissance the students learn by doing.
1	The class size and location as well as hours of the school.
1	The fact that our child had an older sibling who had such a positive experience at the school.
1	the hope of a challenging and interesting academic and arts environment.
1	The most important factor is the variety of courses and the number of choices offered.
1	The most important factor it's the system that the school offers to my child especially in science and math which she likes more than other courses.
1	The new administration and the extra courses that were being offered.
1	The new administration was very appealing to me. The variety of electives.
1	The overall educational experience.
1	The overall feeling when we toured the school.
1	The perception I "felt" while on tour.
1	the positive experience our relatives' children had at Glenfield.
1	The quality of the academics and the quality of the teaching staff.

1	The quality of the teaching staff.
1	The recent positive change in administration. The quality of the teaching staff. The opportunity for my child to take elective classes in areas that interest him. The energy and excitement that comes from the students along with an increase in staff morale due to this past years change in the administration. It was a cumulative effect of all of these things that made our choice very easy.
1	The right environment to succeed... a combination of a safe school, course variety and that he wanted to go to school there.
1	The teaching staff and the facility and the impression of the culture, which I thought would be good for my daughter's personality.
1	The test scores and the selection of classes.
1	The time factor. Glenfield opens early, and I can drop my child off at school before I go to work. I also need the after care program which is conveniently in the school building this year.
1	the variety and number of interesting elective classes and educational opportunities available to my child.
1	The variety of experiences available to our child, and our previous positive experiences with our other children in various houses with various groups of teachers.

Question Six: What was your overall perception of the middle school process? 99 responses

Frequency	Text
2	Fine.
2	Very good.
1	Positive.
1	8 out of 10.
1	A little bit overwhelming.
1	A little challenging, but overall OK .
1	All the schools seem fine.
1	Ask me in 3 years.
1	Challenging--you need to keep challenging and interesting the kids to keep them on track.
1	Complicated and disappointing. Not much explanation of the "house" structure or process, at basic information of the offerings of each school.
1	Easy.
1	Everything went well for the families that "shopped" the schools. There was plenty of inform

	available on the 3 different schools and what they had to offer. There are a lot of families that go on tours to see if a school other than their feeder would be a better fit for their child.
1	Fair, more than enough opportunity to evaluate schools and access to staff and clear picture offering and school theme-approach.
1	Generally positive, but without specific objective information about certain limitations of a particular school in terms of preparation for the MHS curriculum. In particular, I have been disappointed to learn that the available advanced math at Renaissance is much more limited than the other two middle schools.
1	Glenfield is crowded due to pressure from parents who are departing from their feeder school. We have a magnet system, but is it really when one school remains empty and the other packs the rafters?
1	Glenfield's was smooth. When touring the other schools it was a bit chaotic.
1	Good.
1	Good, each school seemed to be competing for your child's attendance. My child was also very impressed by the Glenfield School students who came to talk to them at Hillside pre-graduate.
1	Great.
1	Great! An informative choice in your child's education.
1	Great. I appreciated the time set aside for parents to explore the school and speak with orientation facilitators. The process was very professional and informative.
1	Having been through it before, very easy.
1	I am grateful for the choices. I don't understand why so many parents, once they decided on a school felt they needed to make requests regarding teachers/houses/other classmates. Because I am strongly against doing this, I feel we may have ended up in a house that is not one of the most "popular" ones.
1	I assume you are talking about the middle school selection process. The tours were fine. I did not come out of Glenfield or Renaissance feeling particularly well informed about the curriculum, teaching staff or general vibe.
1	I find the information provided during the process confusing because the schools themselves were confusing.
1	I found the process easy.
1	I had no problems, it was smooth and easy.
1	I liked the selection process very much.
1	I think it was pretty good.
1	I think the informational materials were more organized and informative than the first time I went through it in 2004. The schools should make an effort to have tours led by staff with deep knowledge of the school, however. At Glenfield our tour was led by a House leader who will actually have sixth graders this coming year. She made a much stronger impression on my child than the Phys. Ed. teacher that led our tour at Mt. Hebron.
1	I think the schools handle the tour/introduction to school process pretty well. Although I think the tenor of the guide can be a big influence on both parents and the student. I do NOT think the

	assignment process is transparent enough. (both to school and house.) I think there is a perception that the process can be and is manipulated. Until there is complete transparency, that perception (and suspicion) will remain- undermining parents trust in the selection process.
1	I thought it was well-organized, useful, and informative.
1	I thought that the tours were poorly managed and that each school should have an opportunity to visit one week at a time so that you are not walking around with so many people.
1	I thought the process was great. It gave parents and students the opportunity to see for themselves what each school had to offer.
1	I thought the tours and website information were excellent.
1	I was shocked at how different the two schools were (I didn't visit Renaissance). I had every intention of sending my son to Mt. Hebron because it was convenient but within 5 minutes I was tired. Glenfield was absolutely electric.
1	If you mean selection process, the tours were informative and invaluable for sensing the "feel" of each school. Tours were overcrowded in the smallest of the schools.
1	If you mean the middle school selection/admission process, I think it is overall a good one. I think it's a little strange that while Glenfield and Mt. Hebron have feeder schools, Renaissance you have to select. I think you tend to get a highly motivated student and parent populace at Renaissance because everyone who goes there has chosen (either the parent or the parent/child together) to go there.
1	In general, positive; there were plenty of opportunities to tour the schools, talk to the teachers, and have my child meet with students.
1	In some ways, too much emphasis is given to the selection process and makes it seem as though parents could make the wrong choice. As above the quality of basic education is the same - they follow the same curriculum do they not? It's the subtle differences that attract a child as per a previous comment.
1	In the end, what matters most is our family's perceptions and observations about the school. All middle schools have strong core curriculums.
1	Informative.
1	interesting—daunting.
1	It was a positive experience for us.
1	It was as clear as it usually is...it was easier than selecting an elementary school (because there were fewer middle schools to choose from!) and having a child who's gone through it before definitely helps.
1	It was done well. I was happy because we got our first choice.
1	It was easy because we already were at Hillside.
1	It was fairly easy with only 3 choices vs. the elementary choice which was 6. Also, by 6th grade most kids have a strong idea about where they'd like to be.
1	It was fine. The tour groups were too large. I would have liked more specifics on academics.
1	It was hard to get a really good sense of what the school had to offer. Also, my son's teacher at Glenfield seems amazing it would have been nice to meet more teachers on the school tours.



1	It was just fine.
1	It was relatively positive process, as long as you take the time to go to the orientations and do "homework."
1	It was very confusing for first time parents. The initial flyer sent out by the district was not clear when different schools were open for visitation.
1	It was very open, lots of opportunities to see the schools & learn about them - but that doesn't tell you whether your kid will like the school or not (that lives or dies on the teachers and the friends they make, so it's still a crapshoot, no matter how open the process is.
1	It wasn't lacking in any opportunities for discovery and obtaining the necessary information
1	It went smoothly.
1	More complicated than necessary, poorly explained and communicated by BOE. When touring Glenfield, from where my older child had just graduated, I was grateful to already have had three years' experience to guide me, since the tour did not make the school look at all inviting.
1	My overall perception of the middle school process was a positive experience. It was neatly organized and touring the school seeing what they had to offer and really using my daughters input and judgment as a parent.
1	Non - event. I prefer being tracked to a school. I find that the selection process available allows too many strong students to opt out of a school that their presence is essential to help raise the impression of the school.
1	Not enough info was provided to parents about how the process worked and some of the info provided was confusing or conflicted with itself.
1	Okay.
1	Overall it was positive.
1	Positive.
1	Reasonably well run. I like having school choice -- there is a diverse enough choice of schools that good fits can be found for most children.
1	reasonably well-organized and informative.
1	scheduling of visits confusing, but tours informative and welcoming.
1	Schools should be better balanced racially and socio-economically.
1	Significant frustration when our child was denied his first choice, in spite of older siblings. Many tears and pleas made, on our son's behalf. Some insecurity, as summer homework rushed through, when finally admitted. OUCH!!!
1	Since it was the second time around for us, and my oldest had such a positive experience, my youngest wanted to go there too.
1	Smooth. My child did not want to go any where else.
1	Stressful.
1	stressful and chaotic, like all school choice process in Montclair.
1	Stressful. Seemed it's harder to get in if you are a boy. Town residents seemed surprised by the selection. Process of how Renaissance makes their list was unknown, and parents told me di

	things, often contradictory in nature. It was a difficult decision. We were torn between Glen Renaissance. Their differences were what made both appealing.
1	that ultimately there was not a tremendous amount of difference between the middle schools just a matter of perspective and all of the children will ultimately come together again in 3 y anyway.
1	that's is a preparation for going to a high school and also helps that a child could get more independence and responsibility.
1	The 3 school choices are very different - it was easy to see which one fit my child. Luckily i our feeder school, so there weren't any worries about "getting in".
1	The middle school process was great.
1	The middle schools each presented a basic overview of what they offered. The parents could themselves what each school was like. Pretty straightforward process.
1	The process is fine. Touring the classes with teachers was helpful.
1	The process was okay, as was expected given that we had gone through a similar process to an elementary school.
1	The schools in general were so crowded during the visitation period. Some of the guides we informed as others. Parents like to see some of the teachers in action when viewing schools. it was confusing.
1	The selection process was very accommodating.
1	The selection process works pretty well: there are many opportunities to see the schools, to g sense of how they operate, and to speak to teachers and administrators.
1	The tours were very helpful as we took all three and we could see the relationship of teacher students and also how things worked during a school day.
1	There should be clarification in terms of the touring/information process. Having gone throu more than once, the same mistakes are made each year in terms of not clarifying for parents what is done during each session (i.e. morning information session before tours vs. evening information session, will staff be present for questions, who leads the tours, parents vs. staff went more than once to find that I heard the same information. One session with the tour wo been sufficient.
1	There were a lot of opportunities to tour the schools with my child. I did not have to "get in" school so our process was quite simple.
1	This was my third, so it was a no brainer.
1	Too rushed. It would have been better to see one school a week instead of all 3 schools consecutively.
1	Very favorable. The overall quality of Montclair middle schools is high, so we were not wor about the choice.
1	very good; not as difficult as that of elementary school choice.
1	Very inviting.
1	very well organized.
1	We have never gotten our choice. This last one was a huge strike for us.

1	We were impressed by all the middle schools and felt it was mainly a matter of finding the best match for our child. As we felt that she would be fine at any of the schools, it became her decision finally but with our input. She was torn between Renaissance and Glenfield but for the reasons mentioned above Renaissance won out in the end.
1	Well organized. We felt we learned a lot about the individual schools and could make an informed choice.
1	Well planned, well executed...the tour system and open houses work well to answer questions.
1	When first time middle school parents go through the process, it seems very daunting. Your experience can also vary visit to visit at the same school. One time a great tour guide, another not such a great tour experience.
1	You have to be aggressive (write a letter early in the process, talk to administrators, etc) to get the school you want.

Question Seven: What could be done by the district/individual schools to improve the selection process? 80 responses

Frequency	Text
2	no comment.
1	Communication with parents could have been better. We assumed our child would be given his first choice, as we had a current 8th grader, at the time of selection. We would have put more into our freedom of choice application.
1	(We have two - one female, one male) in 6th grade. for next question.
1	---
1	1. Highlight the main differences between the schools. 2. Highlight what type of children typically thrive (or have challenges) in the specific environment.
1	As I said, make the process above suspicion.
1	assign a parent/staff member to answer questions individually.
1	At Glenfield, a clearer understanding of the aesthetics program and selection process. As compared to Hillside, there really is little real "choice;" yet children and parents are led to believe so. I think many parents end up being upset, and children disillusioned.
1	Be clear and accurate about when and where tours take place, use email to communicate the right information directly to the parents the first time, don't bother with DVDs for presentations, and make presentations shorter, more informative, with less drivel from administrators. We all know the drill: give us just the important, relevant facts without the baloney. Our time should not be wasted.
1	Better outreach to families that normally wouldn't participate in the selection

	process. Renaissance could definitely be more racially and socio-economically diverse than it is.
1	Better teacher input would be invaluable. I found that my son's teachers couldn't really give me a solid answer of why one school over another would better suit his learning style or ability. They need to stay better informed about the 'road ahead'.
1	Can't think of anything.
1	Discourage parents from negotiating class/house placements. Otherwise, I was very satisfied by the process. Maybe being able to sit through some of the school day.
1	Extend the time available to tour the schools.
1	Give the children the option to attend some classes during the selection process to get a feel for the school.
1	Have access to the teachers before making the selection.
1	Have smaller meetings with teachers present.
1	How the lottery at Renaissance is done is a mystery. It would be helpful if it were clearer. It would also be helpful to know how children from each school perform at the high school level. Is there a difference?
1	I can't think of a thing.
1	I cannot think of anything.
1	I do resent that Glenfield continues to be the school of choice and that it is over crowded. When my oldest son went there the houses were increased by 12 students which meant lockers had to be moved in and classes were large. All this while Hebron sits empty. This is counterproductive to the whole purpose behind a house system at Glenfield during such a crucial time of development.
1	I don't know.
1	I don't know.
1	I don't know. I thought it went well.
1	I haven't encountered any problems.
1	I personally don't care about the bells and whistles and the "selling" process. I am not a typical overprotective Montclair parent.
1	I think the district does a very good job with tours, etc. that help kids/parents decide which school is best.
1	I think the process itself is fine, I think the administration at mt hebron could be more dynamic. I think it's unfortunate that sometimes the middle school child gets very little attention b/c everything seems to be geared towards the hs and elem. Schools.
1	I think you already do a great job.
1	I thought it was a good process; perhaps offer a few more times that parents/students could visit the schools.

1	I'm not really sure. Many children we know were chosen. They either are not white or have siblings in the school. We've written and checked in with the Board of Ed many times and there has been no change. Our child is slated to attend Mount Hebron.
1	In an ideal world....more input directly from teachers.
1	It would be great to have smaller tours so you get a better feel.
1	It would be interesting if you did student feedback forms on the teachers/school at the end of each grade, and shared some of that information with us!
1	It would be more helpful to see the classes in houses that will be "Open" for the incoming class.
1	Many parents of children going to Renaissance had issues with the limited number of available slots and then some kids getting in and others who did not after meeting with administrators.
1	Maybe one week is Glenfield tour week, the next for Mt. Hebron, the next Renaissance. That way, each school is only giving tours for one week, but parents can easily re-visit each school as many times as they choose and can digest the information before moving on to the next school. Also, working parents would have to leave work early just 1 night per week instead of multiple nights in one week. Each school should have an equally fine video presentation. The best teachers are great at giving tours, but the drama teacher isn't the only one I want to hear from...give me a fantastic math teacher as well.
1	Memos regarding meeting times, etc. could be clearer, but in my opinion, the biggest problem is that our choice is limited by the poor quality of administration at Mt. Hebron.
1	More ability to see teachers--that's the key. Perhaps do a visit night where you get to see teachers for 10 minutes--like Mt. Hebron does for back to school night.
1	More details of what to expect for incoming 6th graders. A map of the school.
1	More info about the logistics--do parents go on tours alone or with their kids? Are tours ongoing or do you need to arrive exactly at X time? What do you do if you want your child to attend her elementary school's feeder middle school? etc.
1	more time to view school, tours not so early, possibility to come back to visit.
1	N/A
1	no suggestions come to mind -- it was fine.
1	Not sure. It was difficult to get a feel for the classrooms and teachers. I felt like I had to rely on reputations of the teachers. Meanwhile, the teachers (quality of) are a critical factor.
1	Nothing.
1	Nothing in particular comes to my mind on this. We have had a smooth process with both of our children. Of course if we hadn't got the schools we requested we might be feeling differently!

1	Offer "parent and student nights" for each school to explain the offerings/school philosophy for each school and give newcomers parents and students the opportunity to ask questions to the principals, teachers and parents of existing students. The principals of all schools should make themselves available to greet parents and incoming students at the open houses. (not done at Mt. Hebron or Renaissance).
1	Offer a tour while in the fourth grade. Like an early decision process.
1	Offer more times for visitation; as it is there are herds of people on tours. this was particularly awful at Renaissance because of its small size.
1	Parents should be asked what is important for them to see in order to make the decision. Material sent from the district was somewhat unclear as to the times/dates of the visitations and it was not stressed for one of the schools that you needed to be there from the very beginning to get the info you needed. A lot of the selection process comes from other parents/ students.
1	Perhaps tours could be offered on the weekend when parents and administration aren't so rushed.
1	Provide more of an opportunity for parents of incoming 6th graders to speak with other parents who already have children in the school (e.g. reference calls via phone, anecdotes from parents on the school's website, etc.)
1	Provide more tour guides, who are very knowledgeable about the school.
1	Provide the objective information as to whether the middle school basic academic curriculum is limited in any way in relation to the other two middle schools.
1	Put more thought/care into assigning children to "house" with assurance of some peers to smooth the transition at such a pivotal time in life...there should be an allowance for some degree of request in this regard.
1	Renaissance, due to its limited size does not offer a fair chance since many slots are taken by siblings.
1	Rewrite the flyer sent out to parents. Many parents thought that certain schools were open on just one day. How does the early am info sessions differ from the others-i.e. day and night?
1	Schedule the tours within each school for starters.
1	School system does decent job at this. Maybe schedule tours/meetings to better accommodate parents who commute to/from NYC to work.
1	simplify the entire process.
1	Space the school tours over the course of two weeks, rather than one. It is difficult to rearrange parents' schedules to accommodate the tour schedule.
1	Spread out the information gathering/visiting occasions to allow more flexibility for working parents.
1	Starting the process earlier and maybe having activities at the middle schools so that the children would be exposed to the schools earlier and have a greater input

	when the have to decide on their school.
1	The district needs to ensure that the presentation done by each school meets specific criteria.
1	The flyer that is distributed should CLEARLY state what is covered during the various sessions so that parents do not feel that have to go to the same school more than once to receive the same information. It would also be helpful to let parents know who leads the tours, will students be present as well as parents to answer questions and the format of the information sessions.(i.e. Will it be a presentation with open question and answer session).
1	The process was fine.
1	The schools need to start the process earlier, taking around small groups of 8-10 parents during the school day. I found the process to be chaotic, because all of these parents were chatting back and forth, and it was difficult to hear the guides and nearly impossible to ask questions. Parents should sign up for times to walk the schools in smaller groups with guides. Also, there should be a staff member or 2 who act as key parent liaisons at this critical time of year.
1	The system in place seems to work well.
1	The tour operators can be a little more friendly and helpful. They were after 15 minutes boring and uninterested towards parents.
1	There is a slight perception that the parent who is most aggressive can get their child into the school of their choice (primarily dealing with Renaissance) and the District maybe needs to be fairer in the process. Perhaps a public lottery where there can be no back room dealing would be best.
1	There were not enough nights available to visit the school for those of us who work during the day. It would also have been helpful to have been able to speak with the administrators of the school more directly. This is not a negative comment; just a wishful thinking idea, understanding fully well the constraints of time.
1	They could extend the amount of time for individuals to visit the schools. Also, the schedule of tour hours was a bit confusing.
1	Track elementary school to each middle school and reduce the magnet theme at the middle school level. It works at the elementary schools, but even there it is not as substantive as we were originally told.
1	Try to make sure that the schools are balanced - that all 3 schools are strong. There always is a perceived "hot" school which skews the enrollment #'s and then class sizes.
1	We've done well by this process, so for us, nothing.
1	What would have been helpful is if the middle schools had each presented what makes them SO DIFFERENT from the others. That would make the decision-making process easier. This way the parents could be sure to match their child to the right environment.

1	While the individual sales pitches and brochures, provide an overview of each school from the school's point of view, a simple brochure using a spreadsheet or grid format that is produced by central administration showing side by side such criteria as start/end times, length of day, school structure (house/traditional), class size, languages offered, etc. would be very helpful.
1	works fine.
1	You could consider getting rid of the automatic feeding of the elementary schools into either Mt. Hebron or Glenfield and require all ingoing middle schoolers to select a school (the way you do for children entering kindergarten). I'm note sure this would be an improvement, but it might. Otherwise, I think the system works pretty well.



## Appendix F

### Additional Non-Significant Statistical Data

#### *Chi-square tests*

Table F1

*Ethnicity of your Child*  
*Location of the School*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	10.6766	5	0.0582	113 (99.1%)

Table F2

*Gender of your Child*  
*Location of the School*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	1.8703	1	0.1714	114 (100%)

Table F3

*Socio-Economic Status*  
*Location of the School*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	1.5601	2	0.4584	113 (99.1%)

Table F4

*Ethnicity of Your Child*  
*Length of the Instructional Day*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	10.9377	5	0.0526	113 (99.1%)

Table F5

*Gender of Your Child*  
*Length of the Instructional Day*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	2.4122	1	0.1199	114 (100%)

Table F6

*Socio-Economic Status*  
*Length of the Instructional Day*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	0.5269	2	0.76864	113 (99.1%)

Table F7

*Ethnicity of Your Child*  
*Standardized Test Scores*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	8.8041	5	0.1171	113 (99.1%)

Table F8

*Gender of Your Child  
Standardized Test Scores*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	0.0287	1	0.8718	114 (100%)

Table F9

*Ethnicity of Your Child  
Older Sibling Currently Enrolled in School*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	4.2041	5	0.5204	113 (99.1%)

Table F10

*Gender of Your Child  
Older Sibling Currently Enrolled in School*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	0.0977	1	0.7600	114 (100%)

Table F11

*Socio-Economic Status  
Older Sibling Currently Enrolled in School*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	0.4255	2	0.8083	113 (99.1%)

Table F12

*Ethnicity of Your Child*  
*Size of the School*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	7.0177	5	0.2193	113 (99.1%)

Table F13

*Gender of Your Child*  
*Size of the School*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	0.3642	1	0.5497	114 (100%)

Table F14

*Socio-Economic Status*  
*Size of the School*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	1.8968	2	0.3873	113 (99.1%)

Table F15

*Ethnicity of Your Child*  
*Magnet Theme of the School*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	2.5211	5	0.7733	113 (99.1%)

Table F16

*Gender of Your Child  
Magnet Theme of the School*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	0.0250	1	0.8808	114 (100%)

Table F17

*Socio-Economic Status  
Magnet Theme of the School*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	5.6141	2	0.0603	113 (99.1%)

Table F18

*Ethnicity of Your Child  
Perception of the School*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	1.5465	5	0.9076	113 (99.1%)

Table F19

*Gender of Your Child  
Perception of the School*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	0.1009	1	0.7561	114 (100%)

Table F20

*Socio-Economic Status  
Perception of the School*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	0.0281	2	0.9861	113 (99.1%)

Table F21

*Ethnicity of Your Child  
Diversity of the Student Body*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	0.8190	5	0.9758	113 (99.1%)

Table F22

*Gender of Your Child  
Diversity of the Student Body*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	0.5858	1	0.4466	114 (100%)

Table F23

*Socio-Economic Status  
Diversity of the Student Body*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	1.1843	2	0.5531	113 (99.1%)

Table F24

*Ethnicity of Your Child  
Diversity of the Staff*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	7.4708	5	0.1879	113 (99.1%)

Table F25

*Gender of Your Child  
Diversity of the Staff*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	2.4020	1	0.1207	114 (100%)

Table F26

*Socio-Economic Status  
Diversity of the Staff*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	0.8644	2	0.6491	113 (99/1%)

Table F27

*Ethnicity of Your Child*  
*Older Sibling Graduated From School*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	6.0182	5	0.3045	113 (99.1%)

Table F28

*Gender of Your Child*  
*Older Sibling Graduated From School*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	1.5026	1	0.2207	114 (100%)

Table F29

*Socio-Economic Status*  
*Older Sibling Graduated From School*

	Value	df Degrees of Freedom	P Significance	Valid Cases
Pearson Chi-Square	0.5713	2	0.7515	113 (99.1%)