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Family Reflections on the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Summary Report

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Final Summary Report January 2009
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS
SCHOOL CHOICE DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

FAMILY REFLECTIONS
ON THE
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM



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The University of Arkansas

was founded in 1871 as the flagship institution of higher education for the state of Arkansas.

Established as a land grant university, its mandate was threefold: to teach students, conduct research, and perform service and outreach.

The College of Education and Health Professions established the Department of Education Reform in 2005. The department's mission is to advance education and economic development by focusing on the improvement of academic achievement in elementary and secondary schools. It conducts research and demonstration projects in five primary areas of reform: teacher quality, leadership, policy, accountability, and school choice.

The School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP), based within the Department of Education Reform, is an education research center devoted to the non-partisan study of the effects of school choice policy and is staffed by leading school choice researchers and scholars. Led by Dr. Patrick J. Wolf, Professor of Education Reform and Endowed 21st Century Chair in School Choice, SCDP's national team of researchers, institutional research partners and staff are devoted to the rigorous evaluation of school choice programs and other school improvement efforts across the country. The SCDP is committed to raising and advancing the public's understanding of the strengths and limitations of school choice policies and programs by conducting comprehensive research on what happens to students, families, schools and communities when more parents are allowed to choose their child's school.

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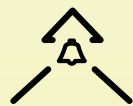
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SCDP Report 0901



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Finally, we thank the families for their voluntary participation in this study. For participants in a longitudinal study, they were reliable, forthcoming, and instructive. We are honored that they would allow us to share their stories. Consistent with our promise to them, their names will remain confidential.

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Abstract

During the spring of 2004, the first federally funded voucher program – the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) - was established. The School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP) recognized that publicly-funded school vouchers represent a relatively new and unstudied approach to school choice and education reform. To address this need, the SCDP requested and received funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation to capture the “Parent and Student Voices on the OSP.” A total of 110 families, representing 180 students, that applied during the first two years of the Program volunteered to participate in this study. As the last installment in a four-part annual series that began in 2005, this report summarizes key findings from the previous reports and provides a general overview of the respondents’ “reflections” upon their three or four years in the Program. Using a phenomenological approach, which includes focus groups, personal interviews and keypad polling information gathering techniques, participants were given multiple opportunities to share or describe their experiences. A consumer framework was often used to contextualize the families’ experiences. Their insights continue to shape the scope and direction of the OSP, and they will help inform other efforts to provide low income families with access to quality school options.



Introduction – Overview Of Study

On January 23, 2004, President Bush signed the DC School Choice Incentive Act into law.¹ This landmark piece of legislation included \$14 million in funding for what would come to be called the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP). The OSP is the first federally funded K-12 scholarship program in the country.

The OSP was designed to provide as many as 1,900 DC children, whose families have annual household incomes below 185 percent of the poverty level (about \$40,000 for a family of four), scholarships worth up to \$7,500 to finance the tuition, fees, and transportation expenses of attending a participating K–12 private school of their choice in the District of Columbia.² Scholarships are renewable throughout the 5-year period of the pilot, as long as families remain eligible for the Program and students remain in good academic standing at the schools they are attending.

The law also charged the U.S. Secretary of Education and the Mayor of the District of Columbia with selecting both an implementer and an independent evaluator of the Program. Using competitive bidding processes, in March of 2004 the Department selected the Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF) and its organizational partners as the program implementer and a research consortium including Westat, Georgetown University, and Chesapeake Research Associates as the official program evaluators.³ The WSF conducted a staged implementation of the OSP in the spring and summer of 2004, enrolling the group that we will call “Cohort 1.” In the spring of 2005 they filled the Program with a larger “Cohort 2.” The official evaluators issued their initial report on program implementation and participation in April of 2005, and followed with a second report on participation in 2006, a first-year impact study in 2007, and a second-year impact study in 2008.⁴

The governmental reports on the OSP have provided a detailed statistical profile of Program applicants as well as the outcomes of scholarship recipients compared to an experimental control group that applied for but did not receive a scholarship. The main findings in those studies to date include that:

footnotes

- 1 Title III of the District of Columbia Appropriations Act of 2004, Division C of HR 2673, 118 Stat. 117, DC Code Sec. 38-1851.01.
- 2 District of Columbia School Choice Incentive Act of 2003, Sec. 313.
- 3 The University of Arkansas also has been involved in the government evaluation of the Program since principal investigator Patrick Wolf moved there from Georgetown University in 2006.
- 4 Patrick Wolf, Babette Gutmann, Nada Eissa, Michael Puma, and Marsha Silverberg, *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: First Year Report on Participation*, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005), available at http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/dc_choice.asp; Patrick J. Wolf, Babette Gutmann, Michael Puma, and Marsha Silverberg, *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Second Year Report on Participation*, U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006, available at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20064003/>; Patrick J. Wolf, Babette Gutmann, Michael Puma, Lou Rizzo, Nada O. Eissa, and Marsha Silverberg, *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After One Year*, U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007, available at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20074009/>; Patrick J. Wolf, Babette Gutmann, Michael Puma, Brian Kisida, Lou Rizzo, and Nada O. Eissa, *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Two Years*, U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, NCEE 2008-4023, June 12, 2008, available at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20084023.asp>.

Initial Program applicants were more likely to be African American and enrolled in special education and the federal lunch program than DC Public School (DCPS) students who did not apply;⁵

About three-quarters of the students who received Opportunity Scholarships initially used them to attend one of the 68 DC private schools in the Program;⁶

Two years after the award of a scholarship, the average reading and math test scores of the treatment group were higher than those of the control group, but statistically significant gains were limited to a few specific subgroups of students in reading and were tentative;⁷

Parents expressed much higher levels of satisfaction with their child’s school and believed their children were significantly safer than if they had not been offered a scholarship.⁸

The governmental study continues, with a report on third-year results expected in June of 2009.

Research Motivation And Approach

The government-sponsored evaluation of the OSP focuses exclusively on quantitative and experimental analyses of the effects of the Program on student test scores, educational attainment, and other critical factors. Ultimately, that evaluation also seeks to examine the District of Columbia’s public school response

to competition resulting from the transfer of students to private schools. Such rigorous quantitative program evaluations are essential for informing the policy debate surrounding school choice. At the same time, quantitative evaluations often do not capture the contextual nuances of what is happening in the lives of the families experiencing the Program.

In 2004, the School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP) received support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation for a qualitative assessment of the Program that would chronicle the real-life experiences of OSP families.⁹ Such research falls within the general category of phenomenology, a research approach that promotes understanding by documenting and communicating to readers the lived experiences of study participants.¹⁰ It is a non-evaluative research method in that there are no normatively “good” or “bad” results in phenomenological research. Qualitative research such as this should be judged solely based on the extent to which it effectively brings alive the actual experiences of its subjects. Thus, what we present here is a study of the District of Columbia OSP but not an evaluation of that Program.

⁵ Wolf et al, *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: First Year Report on Participation*, p. 35, supra note 4.

⁶ Wolf et al, *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Second Year Report on Participation*, p. 17, supra note 4.

⁷ Wolf et al, *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Two Years*, pp. xxi-xxiii, supra note 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

⁹ We thank the Annie E. Casey Foundation for their support, but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

¹⁰ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, Second Edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003, p. 15.

Over the last four years, the SCDP research team has engaged a randomly-selected group of volunteer families in a series of focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The purpose of these qualitative data collection techniques is to further explore the participants' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and experiences in a way that cannot be fully captured by the quantitative methods being employed in the governmental evaluation.¹¹ This qualitative study evolved in the following ways:

In year 1, the complete set of parent and student responses to our focus group discussion questions was chronicled;¹²

In year 2, participants were encouraged to revisit and refine or modify their initial comments in both focus groups and personal interviews;¹³

In year 3, parents were asked to reprioritize their responses and to explain why their responses changed or persisted;¹⁴ and

In year 4, participants were requested to reflect upon how they and their families have changed as a result of participating in the OSP.

Many of the research questions explored in this study were asked consistently each year. They included issues or topics that are central to the policy debate over parental school choice. For example:

- What do families look for in private schools?
- What forms of information about the schools were most and least helpful?
- How do parents and students respond to the challenges and opportunities associated with their new schools?
- What unique or unanticipated issues arise from one year to the next?
- What resources or supports could help students and parents?
- How do parents measure student progress?
- Are the parents or families satisfied?
- What recommendations, if any, would participants make for improving the Program?

The primary objectives were to compare and contrast the participants' responses across subgroups and cohorts, as well as assess the changes in their responses based on their actual experiences.

¹¹ Focus groups have been used as an effective tool for measuring the impact of public policy. See for example: Caroline Dyer, "Researching the Implementation of Educational Policy: A Backward Mapping Approach," *Comparative Education*, 35:1 (1999), pp. 45-61; D.L. Morgan, *Focus Group as Qualitative Research* 2nd Ed. (London: Sage, 1997); D.W. and P.N. Shandasani, *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice* (London: Sage, 1992).

¹² Thomas Stewart, Patrick J. Wolf, and Stephen Q. Cornman, *Parent and Student Voices on the First Year of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program*, Report of the School Choice Demonstration Project, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, October 2005, SCDP 05-01, now available at http://www.uaedreform.org/SCDP/DC_Research/PSV1.pdf.

¹³ Stephen Q. Cornman, Thomas Stewart, and Patrick J. Wolf, *New Education Consumers: Parent and Student Voices on the Second Year of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program*, Report of the School Choice Demonstration Project, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, May 2007, SCDP 07-01, now available at http://www.uaedreform.org/SCDP/DC_Research/PSV2.pdf.

¹⁴ Thomas Stewart, Patrick J. Wolf, Stephen Q. Cornman, and Kenann McKenzie-Thompson, *Satisfied, Optimistic, Yet Concerned: Parent and Student Voices on the Third Year of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program*, Report of the School Choice Demonstration Project, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, December 2007, SCDP 07-02, now available at http://www.uaedreform.org/SCDP/DC_Research/PSV3.pdf.

Outreach To And Overview Of Participants

The first task was to recruit study participants. The research team discussed the project and sought volunteer participants at various OSP orientation sessions as well as in mailings to OSP families. During 2004, the initial year of partial Program implementation, 230 OSP families volunteered for the study. A random sample of 60 families, stratified to reflect key programmatic subgroups,¹⁵ was selected from that pool and comprised our Cohort 1 participants. A modified version of this process was repeated in 2005, as an additional 92 families volunteered to participate in our study and 50 of them were selected to comprise Cohort 2 participants. The 110 families participating in the study represent 180 students participating in the OSP.

The findings and observations presented in this qualitative study are based on information gathered about the participant families over four years from three different sources:

A total of **37 guided focus group discussions**, distributed throughout all four years of the study, 29 of which involved various groups of parents and 8 of which involved middle and high school students;

A total of **36 semi-structured personal interviews** with participants in years 2 (23) and 4 (13) of the study; of which 34 were with parents and 2 were with high-school age students;

A final session with 39 parent participants that permitted them to give anonymous real-time feedback to polling questions using a wireless interactive response system.

Because Cohort 1 began the Program one year before Cohort 2, the alignment of “Program year” with “focus group study year” differed for each Cohort (Table 1). We situate the findings we present below in terms of the focus group study year, which aligns exactly with the Program year for Cohort 1 but means that, for example, the second study year was the first Program year for Cohort 2. The one-year lag between Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 families was most significant at the start of the study. Therefore, we identify Cohort 2 responses in year 2 of the study as “initial,” since they were new to the Program at that time. By the fourth and final year of the study, the one-year lag between the Program start for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 families appeared to be much less consequential.

Table 1

Focus Group Study Year	Program Year	
	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
First (2004-2005)	First	
Second (2005-2006)	Second	First
Third (2006-2007)	Third	Second
Fourth (2007-2008)	Fourth	Third

¹⁵ We randomly selected participants after first classifying them as (1) Spanish-speaking, (2) English-speaking with students in elementary school, (3) English-speaking with students in middle school, (4) English-speaking with students in high school.

The families that participated in this study represented all eight of the District of Columbia’s Wards or major geographical areas. Roughly equal proportions of the participating families had children in the OSP within the elementary (K-5), middle (6-8), and high school (9-12) grade divisions at the start of the study. A total of 25 of the 110 families (23 percent) spoke Spanish as their primary language. Additional details regarding the demographic characteristics of participants and the study’s research methodology are provided in Appendix A.

The conversations with the participating families and the subsequent findings reported here reflect our enduring interest in understanding what actually happens when low-income urban families participate in a new publicly-funded school choice program such as the OSP. The interest in this topic is best reflected by the burgeoning literature on school choice, which we discuss in italics at the start of each substantive sub-section on study findings.

We acknowledge the limitations of such qualitative, phenomenological research. Participating families are self-selected in a number of ways, including their desire to apply for an Opportunity Scholarship and their willingness to discuss their experiences with researchers in a public group setting. The statements and experiences of the families in this study are not necessarily representative of all OSP families or the broader population of low-income urban parents and students in the District of Columbia. The experiences and opinions that the participants shared were not necessarily caused by their participation in the OSP. However, their stories are a lens through which we can glimpse and likely gain a better understanding of what it has been like for this group of new school consumers in the nation’s capital.

General Findings of Four Years of Family Voices on the OSP

In this section we present the key findings that have emerged from over four years of qualitative data collection and analysis on the experiences of families in the Opportunity Scholarship Program. These findings were selected primarily because they were mentioned frequently and persistently by study participants. Some of the findings reflect positively on the OSP. Others describe the shortcomings and limitations of the Program and the schools. As a whole, the findings reveal key aspects of the lived experiences of our study families.

The findings are grouped and summarized in the following categories:

1. What do families look for in private schools?
2. How important is information?
3. How do families respond to challenges of the new school environment?
4. How do parents assess student development and progress?
5. What are the sources of family satisfaction?
6. Are focus groups an outlet for expression?
7. What recommendations do parents have to improve the Program?



What do families look for in private schools?

A. Theory and Previous Research

The specific school preferences that choosing parents have is central to the debate about the efficacy and desirability of school choice programs. As Fuller and his colleagues argue, “choice schemes assume that the family is highly rational, acts from clear preferences, and is able to effectively demand action from local schools and teachers.”¹⁶ If parents do not really know what to look for in a school, or if they seek objectionable conditions such as racial uniformity, then their educational choices will be unlikely to result in educational benefits for their child or society in general.

The OSP serves a group of low-income urban families that are almost exclusively African American or Latino. What evidence do we have regarding the preferences of such families for the characteristics of schools? Regarding the student demographics of the school, Hamilton and Guin conclude that urban families tend to give little weight to race considerations but do factor school poverty rates into their decision.¹⁷ They report that, “Many parents believe that peer effects (the average ability of the child’s schoolmates) and resources (e.g. class size) are important determinants of student outcomes, and therefore are likely to emphasize these factors if they have information on them.”¹⁸ Schneider and his colleagues go even farther in concluding that “Lower socioeconomic status and minority parents are more likely to value schools that perform the bedrock function of providing a safe environment and the fundamentals of education.”¹⁹ Their claims are consistent with two experimental evaluations of means-tested school choice programs in Washington, DC, that have found that parents who choose schools are likely to describe “academic quality” as the most important reason for their selection, with school safety, discipline, and location as additional important concerns.²⁰

B. Summary of Findings in Years 1-3

In the first year of focus groups, parents listed a variety of reasons for their school choices, the most common being smaller class sizes, school safety, and a religious or values-based environment. Parents also sought a more rigorous academic curriculum, the opportunity to learn foreign languages, racial diversity, and close proximity to their home.

“The curriculum is very different and the language is very different. When I looked at the difference and I said to them that this school that they’re going to is preparing them to go to college.”
(Cohort 1 Middle School Parent, Spring 2004)

“Actually, I wanted my child to be in a school setting where it has racial diversity. I didn’t want it to be where she would just see her color.” (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent, Spring 2004)

¹⁶ Bruce Fuller, Richard F. Elmore, Gary Orfield, “Policy-Making in the Dark: Illuminating the School Choice Debate,” in *Who Chooses? Who Loses?: Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1996, p. 3.

¹⁷ Laura S. Hamilton and Kacey Guin, “Understanding How Families Choose Schools,” in *Getting Choice Right: Ensuring Equity and Efficiency in Education Policy*, edited by Julian R. Betts and Tom Loveless (Washington: Brookings, 2005), p. 44.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁹ Mark Schneider, Paul Teske, and Melissa Marschall, *Choosing Schools: Consumer Choice and the Quality of American Schools* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 107.

²⁰ Wolf et al, *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program*, p. C-7, supra note 4; Patrick J. Wolf, Paul E. Peterson, and Martin R. West, *Results of a School Voucher Experiment: The Case of Washington, D.C., After Two Years*, Harvard University Program on Education Policy and Governance, PEPG/01-05 (Cambridge, MA, August 2001), Table 3.

21 PSV Focus Groups, Spring 2006.

The information gathered from the second year interviews and focus groups indicated that parents had a strong preference for academic quality, with a diverse set of secondary preferences centered on safety, order and discipline, as well as convenience. The majority of parents of elementary, middle and high school students in both their first (Cohort 1) and second (Cohort 2) year of the OSP responded that small class size was the first characteristic that they were seeking.²¹ The parents were also interested in the qualifications of the teachers

in these smaller classrooms and sought information pertaining to school-level student achievement.

Parents with older children frequently expressed their desire for schools that offered a more “structured” or “disciplined” environment, or at least a physically safer one. One parent described the ideal characteristics of a school:

“The safety of the school and [a school] that’s gonna nurture [the student]. Not to hold her back but to push her forward.” (Cohort 2 High School Parent, Spring 2006)

An Example of a Dissatisfied Chooser

Paula is a native of Washington, D.C. who graduated from the public school system. She describes attending school as one of her best experiences in life. She has one child in the OSP. When asked how she would compare her parenting style to that of her parents, she explains that, like her parents, she stresses the importance and seriousness of education to her children.

She has become increasingly concerned about the quality of teachers at her child’s private school. She is most concerned about the fact that perhaps her child’s school is not equipped to handle the increased number of OSP students it is accepting. Though she felt the school was not prepared, she kept her child in private school primarily to ensure her safety. In addition to her disappointment with the quality of the teachers at her child’s school, she was surprised that the class size was no different than the public school they left. Furthermore, she was disgruntled because she felt she was paying for services the school advertised, such as tutoring, which were not being offered.

While she is considering enrolling her child in a public charter school, she remains very concerned about safety. Paula’s advice to parents who are attending or are considering attending private schools is to conduct surprise or unannounced visits to make sure that the schools are really offering what they advertise. She believes the Program is most beneficial if students enroll in elementary school, as opposed to middle and high school. Her greatest concern could be best addressed by establishing a monitoring system to ensure that private schools that participate in OSP have qualified teachers and core features of the program they advertise to parents.[†]

[†] At the beginning of each “Findings from Year 4” section, we include a vignette or profile of one of the twelve parents who were personally interviewed. The interviews revealed the diversity of the families and complexity of their school choice experiences. The vignettes are designed to complement the direct quotes and polling Exhibits by providing deeper insights into the lives of the parents and their families. The names used in these vignettes are not those of the actual participants.

“It’s...hard for the kids to really...want to go...outside because the neighborhoods in which they live are unsafe.” (Cohort 1 Middle School Parent, Spring 2006)

By the third year of the focus groups, class size continued to emerge as a crucial characteristic that elementary and middle school parents look for when choosing a school. The majority of elementary school families were adamant that their children be in classrooms with smaller numbers of students and an opportunity for more individualized attention. In contrast to the first year of the Program, safety was less of an issue for both cohorts. When asked to explain why they now rated safety as a less important concern three years later, several parents provided reasons that were generally captured by this respondent’s comment:

“Well I think once you pull your children out of public schools and you get comfortable with the private atmosphere, safety becomes no longer an issue because they are safe. So then you can focus on what is important and that is the curriculum.” (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent, Spring 2007)

One small group of parents, mostly of middle and high school students, did not change their position on safety from the initial focus groups. This Cohort 1 parent captured the general attitude of the parents who expressed that enhanced school safety was and remains a vital reason for their participation in the OSP:

“I don’t have to worry about ...the fighting in the school. They might have one or two little misunderstandings but it’s not an everyday occurrence like it was at (his previous public school). At (his previous public school) they fought every day -- it’s always commotion -- so safety is still number one for me.” (Cohort 1 High School Parent, Spring 2007)

At the high school level, the majority of Cohort 1 families continued to view safety as one of the two most important characteristics of a new school throughout the first three years of the Program. Cohort 2 high school families, on the other hand, described a shift in their primary concerns from safety to the quality of the curriculum. These families were conscious of the fact that as their children mature into young adults, a quality high school education will significantly influence their children’s life chances, yet many of them also recognize that safety is a near constant concern for the parents of adolescents in the inner city.

C. New Findings from Year 4

In our fourth year of focus groups, a few parents indicated that the atmosphere the teachers create for students is also important. One parent noted:

“I look at the curriculum, the setting, the classroom size, the environment, the teachers and they don’t give you their entire background and history of the teachers. But I wanna know that they’re personable, they’re loving, they’ll tend to the children’s needs on all levels. Pretty much overall they’re for the children, the children are number one, and will work, will provide services for the children in the educational field, working with children.” (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent, Spring 2008)



How important is information?

A. Theory and Previous Research

Information is central to consumer activity in any context. Shoppers rely on the information on clothing labels to assess the fit and quality of an outfit, and the information on packaging to determine the likely taste and nutritional value of the food that they buy. Magazines such as *Consumer Reports* and countless Internet sites provide guidance and comprehensive consumer information to eager subscribers and Internet users. There is general agreement that informed consumers help to make markets work properly. According to Hamilton and Guin, “A critical factor influencing parental choice behaviors is the quality of information available to parents on the schools that operate within the choice system.”²² High-quality and accessible information supports educational markets by avoiding or minimizing “information asymmetry” between suppliers and consumers.²³

Well-informed consumers are more likely to match their children to appropriate schools. If parents are primarily interested in academic quality, the presence of a large group of well-informed choosers will pressure schools to improve the quality of their educational product. The main areas of disagreement surround the questions of what school information sources are most helpful, how much information is enough, and how many choosers need to be well informed in order for schools to respond in desirable ways to their preferences.

The three most commonly discussed sources of consumer information about schools are information centers and guides, social networks, and personal site visits. Henig argues that general sources, such as information centers and school directories, are especially valuable because they are available to all parents, regardless of their personal resources.²⁴ Citing several previous studies, Hamilton and Guin suggest that “social networks, including extended family and friends, are a primary source of information about schools for many parents.”²⁵ Wells stresses the importance of school site visits, noting that school choosers who select a school site-unseen are more likely later to express buyer’s remorse.²⁶

Although research has been unable to pinpoint exactly how much information is necessary to be an effective educational consumer, there is general agreement that more is better. Families that are able to gather information from multiple sources and visit several different schools likely will be able to separate the more reliable from the less helpful information and draw accurate contrasts between various educational suppliers, services and products.

²² Hamilton and Guin, “Understanding How Families Choose Schools,” p. 46, *supra* note 17.

²³ Information asymmetry occurs when one party to a transaction, either the buyer or the seller, has significantly better information than the other regarding the quality of the product and the true cost of producing it. For background on the theory of information asymmetry, see William A. Niskanen, Jr., *Bureaucracy and Representative Government* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1971); Armen A. Alchian and Harold Demsetz, “Production, Information Costs, and Economic Organization,” *American Economic Review*, 62 (1972); and Terry M. Moe, “The New Economics of Organization,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 28 (1984).

²⁴ Jeffrey R. Henig, *Rethinking School Choice*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994) p. 210.

²⁵ Hamilton and Guin, “The Demand Side of School Choice,” p. 10, *supra* note 17.

²⁶ Amy Stuart Wells, “African-American Students’ View of School Choice,” in Bruce Fuller and Richard F. Elmore (eds.), *Who Chooses? Who Loses? Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1996), p. 36.

B. Summary of Findings in Years 1-3

In the beginning stages of the OSP, the availability of accurate information about the Program and the participating schools emerged as an extremely important point of discussion within the focus groups. Parents relied on a variety of information sources including the WSF, private and public schools, other parents (i.e. their social networks), and prior knowledge. Most parents in the first year focus groups found the information packets provided by the WSF, especially the directory on participating schools, to be useful in finding a school. They were also generally impressed with the frequency of communication from the WSF.

“The level of communication, letters, phone calls, follow-up letters, follow-up phone calls...I mean sometimes we are busy and we need that.” (Cohort 1 High School parent, Spring 2005)

The evidence from the second year focus groups and interviews revealed that access to “reliable information” is one of the most consistent needs expressed by parents of students at all stages of their schooling during both the first and second year of the OSP. In fact, many families both voiced their appreciation for accurate

An Example of a Successful Chooser

Fatima is a single mother who is a first generation U.S. citizen. She identifies herself as a Muslim and was born in an East African country. She has four children, and one of her daughters is attending a private middle school as part of the OSP. She notes that her primary reasons for pursuing the scholarship and her vision for her daughter is that she learn multiple languages, specifically Arabic.

Unlike the role she now plays, it is customary in Fatima’s native country for the men to oversee and manage the children’s education. She describes her education in Africa as “strict” yet she benefitted from learning several languages. When asked to explain why she selected a particular school, she said: “This was a school that really had a unique program. They had dual language and for me I was very, very interested because, you know coming from Africa, we speak many languages.”

As a result of her personal experiences as a student, she strongly believes that children have the right to feel safe and nurtured in school, public or private. When asked how her daughter is doing now, she explained: “She can read in Arabic like someone who has been learning all their life.” She feels strongly that ending the Program would be a “disaster for the children.” Her support for the Program is best reflected by the fact that she has referred at least three families whose children are now enrolled in the OSP.

and reliable information about schools AND demanded greater access to more and better school information each year that their children participated in the Program. Since the beginning of the OSP, both cohorts of Spanish-speaking families consistently placed a higher premium on site visits and conversations with school-based personnel than did other segments of OSP families, possibly due to language and literacy challenges. Evidence from the third year of focus groups indicated that the majority of Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 elementary school families thought that school visits were the most reliable sources of information about new schools. However, several parents expressed that their initial positive impressions of the schools they chose were inconsistent with actual experiences::

“They always seemed like they’re [good schools] with their open house but after you get your child there it’s not the same. Everything is just totally different, just totally different.” (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent, Spring 2007)

Elementary school families continue to place a high premium on the school directory developed by WSF. From another perspective, parents of middle school students initially rated the school directory as the most helpful source of information about potential schools, though they later suggested that WSF staff and school visits were their preferred source of information about schools. Throughout the study, the high school families felt that school visits, specifically conversations with school-based personnel, were the most reliable sources of information.²⁷

C. New Findings from Year 4

The school selection process is fundamental to any choice program, and the research team explored this topic with parents each year of the study. In the fourth and final year of data collection, parents were given the opportunity to reflect upon the school selection process and reconsider the significance of the information they used to select private schools. The polling approach provided the research team an opportunity to verify many of the anecdotal findings and observations that were reported in previous years.²⁸

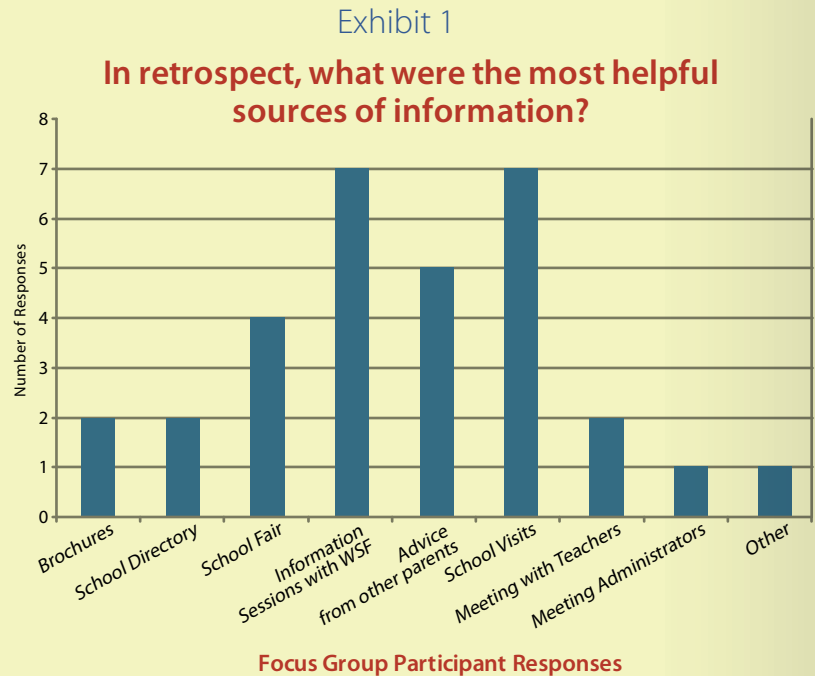
When parents were asked to reflect upon the importance of various forms of information that they were exposed to over three or four years in the OSP, the respondents indicated that there is no substitute for face-to-face communications with Program and school personnel. The parents also cited interaction with other parents in the OSP as a source of information. School visits and information sessions with WSF were the

²⁷ It should be noted that only one high school agreed to accept large numbers of OSP students and over 80 percent of the high school students participating in the Program attend that school. Thus, high school families, unlike the elementary and middle school families, were not challenged to consider multiple schools. This may have allowed many of them to devote more time and energy to investigating in person the one large high school participating in the Program.

²⁸ We caution readers that the interactive polling was conducted with a sample of just 39 of the 110 parents who participated in various elements of the study. Thus, any differences between the results from the focus groups and those from the interactive polling could be due to differences in the samples of OSP parents that participated in those two forms of data collection.

two sources of information cited as most valuable to parents, followed by advice from other parents and the school fair (Exhibit 1).

The formal sources of information, such as brochures and the school directory, were cited as most helpful by approximately one quarter of the parents who responded to this polling question. However the content of the directory and subsequent school visits were frequently discussed by parents in personal interviews, even in the fourth year of the program.



“I felt that the scholarship program.... They need to focus more on what they [participating schools] are writing in that pamphlet, in that directory to tell you, to describe the school to each one of the parents. When they describe their schools, make that description of everything that the kids will be having in that particular school, they need to go visit that school and make sure that what they’re saying is what they’re offering, what they do have, and actually see it, go there. Go during the time of day that it should be given to make sure that it is being done.” (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent Who Withdrew from the OSP, personal interview Spring 2008)

In response to the inquiry about the most helpful sources of information, the Cohort 1 and 2 parents’ responses were notably different. Cohort 1 parents were much more likely to cite information sessions with WSF, the school fair, and brochures (Exhibit 2). Cohort 2 parents were much more likely than Cohort 1 parents to list school visits and meeting administrators as the most helpful sources. This pattern of responses may reflect the different school search conditions faced by the two cohorts. The OSP could not be launched until late April of 2004, giving Cohort 1 families just a few weeks to find placements in participating private schools.²⁹ Under such circumstances, many Cohort 1 families relied more heavily on programmatically supplied sources of information to choose schools. Cohort 2 families, in contrast, had many months to find placements in participating schools. The Cohort 2 families used the extra time to visit schools and meet with administrators to inform their school selections.

²⁹ Wolf et. al., *The DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: First Year Report on Participation* pp. 27-30, supra note 4.

³⁰ When disaggregated in this way, most of the response categories had very small respondent samples of 0, 1, or 2. Thus, the results should be interpreted cautiously.

Different parent subgroups provided various responses regarding the most valued sources of information (Exhibit 3).³⁰

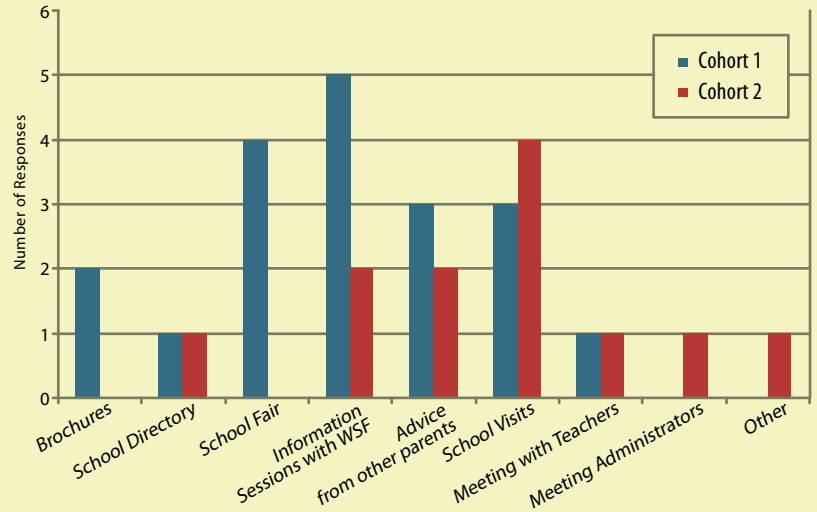
The subgroup of parents who withdrew from the Program presented the most distinctive pattern of responses. Former scholarship users were more likely than parents in the other subgroups to list the school visits as the most helpful and none of them cited individual communications with other parents, school personnel, or the WSF as most helpful in their school choice process. In contrast, subgroups that relied on interpersonal interactions with school personnel were more likely to remain in the Program. Based on these responses, it is possible that families that used less interpersonal forms of information relied on information that was less helpful.

Some segments of parents, particularly the middle school families, initially considered the school directory to be a very important source of information. In retrospect, all parent groups indicated that school visits and direct communications with administrators, teachers, and other parents were the most valuable sources of information about schools.

The reader should remember that the families here have the benefit of hindsight. The summary descriptive information such as school directories and brochures may be especially important to new school choosers who have less access to information about schools and whose existing social networks are a limited resource. Once families become more knowledgeable and gain experience with school choice, they may tend to tap into other information, such as first-hand school visits, meetings with school personnel, and informal parent networks.

Exhibit 2

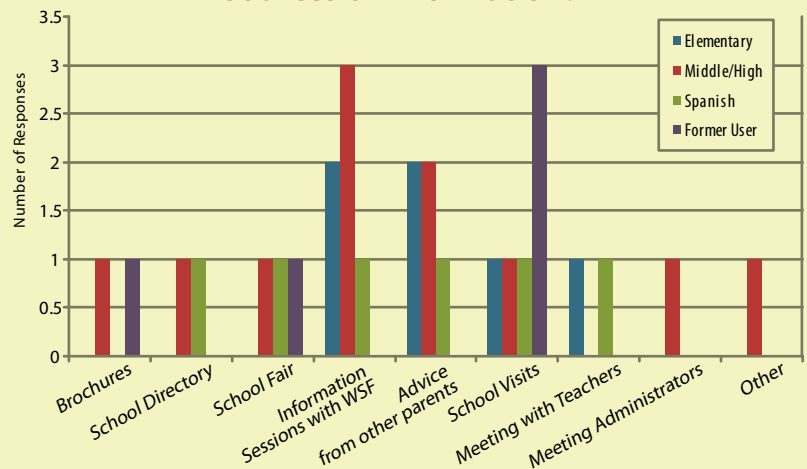
In retrospect, what were the most helpful sources of information?



Focus Group Participant Responses

Exhibit 3

In retrospect, what were the most helpful sources of information?



Focus Group Participant Responses



How do families respond to challenges of the new school environment?

A. Theory and Previous Research

For parents who previously sent their children to neighborhood public schools, the new environment of private schools can represent a significant change. Switching schools alone has a temporary disruptive effect on student learning, especially for students who are disadvantaged in various ways.³¹ Transferring away from friends at a familiar school to a new school with different peers and a dissimilar educational environment, which might include different sets of expectations, is likely to be challenging for students, at least initially. Private schools are well known for offering challenging curricula and assigning more frequent homework than public schools.³² Parent and student reports have suggested that private schools are more likely to require school uniforms, practice strict discipline, and include religious activities and instruction during the school day.³³

Previous research suggests that private schools tend to require more of parents. High levels of parental involvement are either mandated or at least informally expected, and parents are responsible for assisting with homework and monitoring the more frequent school-home communications typical of private schools.³⁴ Researchers commonly view this as a positive feature of private schools. Schneider and his colleagues point out that the increased parental involvement required when schools are chosen by parents presents a great opportunity in addition to challenges. School choice can be appealing to parents who are highly motivated or who have specific preferences.³⁵

Commentators describe such developments as the process of building supportive educational communities. Brandl writes that voluntary institutions, such as private schools, have a significant potential to develop a vibrant community capable of effectively nurturing young children.³⁶ Bowles and Gintis write of how community experiences that are both frequent and intensive tend to reinforce positive social norms such as cooperation toward shared goals.³⁷ Their game-theoretic analysis is easily applied to the case of private schools that require substantial community involvement.

How enthusiastically will OSP families be welcomed into their newly-chosen private schools? Wells warns that existing school communities tend to be wary of newcomers, stigmatizing students perceived to be outsiders.³⁸ Any exclusion or stigmatization of new students or parents would alienate them within their new educational environment.

³¹ See Russell W. Rumberger, "Student Mobility and Academic Achievement," ERIC Digest, ED0-PS-02-1, June 2002; Eric A. Hanushek, John F. Kain, and Steven G. Rivkin, "Disruption Versus Tiebout Improvement: The Costs and Benefits of Switching Schools," *Journal of Public Economics* 88, 2004, pp. 1721-1746.

³² Patrick J. Wolf and Daniel S. Hoople, "Looking Inside the Black Box: What School Factors Explain Voucher Gains in Washington, D.C.?" *Peabody Journal of Education*, 81, 2006.

³³ *Ibid.*, especially p. 134.

³⁴ For examples, see William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson, with Patrick J. Wolf and David E. Campbell, *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools, Revised Edition* (Washington: Brookings, 2006); Anthony Bryk, Peter B. Holland, and Valerie Lee, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

³⁵ Schneider et al, *Choosing Schools*, p. 12, *supra* note 19.

³⁶ John E. Brandl, *Money and Good Intentions are Not Enough: Or Why a Liberal Democrat Thinks States Need Both Competition and Community* (Washington: Brookings, 1998).

³⁷ Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, "The Moral Economy of Communities: Structured Populations and the Evolution of Pro-Social Norms," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 19, 1998, pp. 3-25.

³⁸ Wells, "African-American Students' View of School Choice," p. 37, *supra* note 26.

*We might reasonably expect that the different expectations and requirements in the private school sector will likely require some measure of adjustment for students and educators as well as parents. Although previous research on “school choice adjustment” is quite sparse, the few studies that exist suggest that adjustment is more difficult for older students and that the mutual adjustment of families to schools and schools to families is more likely to be successful the longer choice students remain in a school.*³⁹

B. Summary of Findings in Years 1-3

The first-year focus groups revealed that many parents faced significant challenges with the transition to private schools, including juggling work and family schedules to help their children with homework, participating in school activities, meeting additional financial obligations, developing a relationship with teachers, and overcoming language and cultural challenges.

In the first year many parents felt that the curriculum in their children’s new schools was more challenging and were very positive about increased demands on their children. Following are some of the responses that were offered in the first year during the general discussion about transition:

³⁹ Patrick J. Wolf, William G. Howell, and Paul E. Peterson, *School Choice in Washington, D.C.: An Evaluation After One Year*, Report of the Program on Education Policy and Governance, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, February 2000, PEPG/00-08, available at <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/Papers/dc00x.pdf>; Eric A. Hanushek and Steven G. Rivkin, “Does Public School Competition Affect Teacher Quality,” in *The Economics of School Choice*, edited by Caroline M. Hoxby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Fred M. Newmann, BetsAnn Smith, Elaine Allensworth, and Anthony S. Bryk, *School Instructional Program Coherence: Benefits and Challenges* (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2001).

⁴⁰ Stewart et al, *Parent and Student Voices on the First Year* . . . pp. 33-35, supra note 12.

“The teacher is excellent, the intensity of the curriculum they have at her school is excellent; they have these pre-K kids doing fractions.” (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent, Spring 2005)

“It was a lot of work. I was afraid that with so many things to do she would get sick.” (Cohort 1 Spanish-Speaking Parent, Spring 2005)

Although some parents recognized that their children might experience a difficult adjustment period, the majority of parents felt that overall standards should not be lowered to accommodate OSP students. As one parent noted:

“Our kids need to come up, we don’t need to bring our standards down.” (Cohort 1 High School Parent, Spring 2005)

Our first focus group report documented that student “stigmatization” by school staff was a concern for many parents before they enrolled their children in their schools of choice.⁴⁰ At the end of the first year, parents noted a moderate level of stigmatization that ranged from feelings of discomfort at home-school meetings to teachers “singling out” their child as a scholarship student.

In the second year of focus groups, there was a significant change in the perceptions of parents regarding the receptivity of teachers, school officials and other parents to children who recently joined their private schools. In contrast to the reports in our previous study that several OSP parents and students felt “singled out,” parents in both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 unanimously reported feeling very comfortable in the second year of the OSP. This change suggests that families in the second year gradually felt more comfortable as their time and involvement in the Program progressed. In the third year of focus groups, a few isolated cases of stigmatization and “singling out” of OSP students were reported. Generally speaking, there was very little to report on this matter by the end of the third year.

An Example of a Successful Transition

Carol is a single mother who is a native of South Carolina. She moved to the District of Columbia when she was nine years old. Carol has completed some college and attended a technical school. During the interview, she described herself as someone who loved school and remembered crying if she could not go to school. She now has three children and one of them is participating in the OSP.

When asked to compare her personal experiences as a student with those of her daughter, Carol noted that her daughter needs more encouragement. Her daughter is not as excited about school as she was, and she had a difficult time finding an appropriate private school for her. Because Lindsey agreed to enter a summer remedial support program (an intervention that was recommended by a teacher), she secured admissions in a private school she thought would offer her daughter the smaller class sizes and individual attention she needed. On the other hand, she thought her other children were doing well in the public schools and did not move them.

Carol’s daughter appears to be doing much better in her new school. Carol believes the smaller class sizes, better teachers, and more individualized attention best explain her daughter’s success. As she looks to the future, her only concern is finding a high school. She stresses that despite the limited high school options, she is pleased with the Program and has recommended it to other parents.

C. New Findings from Year 4

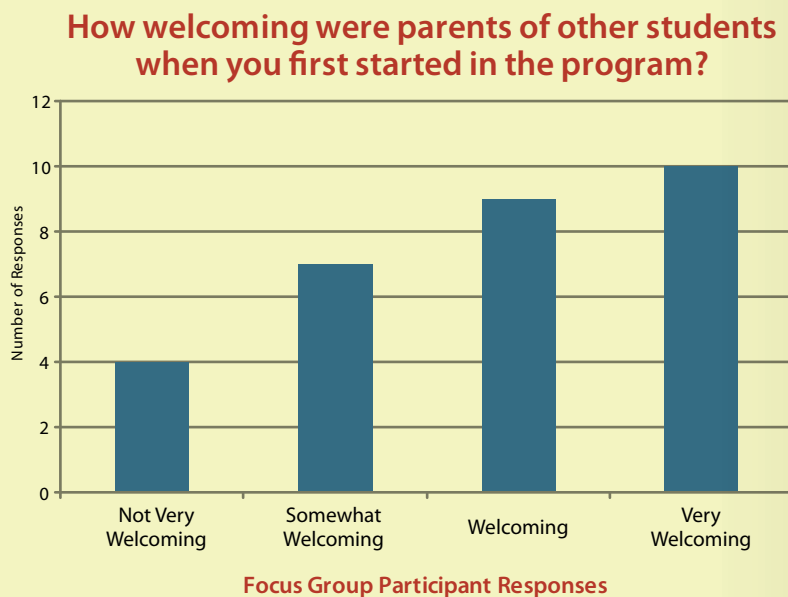
By the fourth year of the program, the majority of parents remained focused on being more involved with their children’s life at school, such as assisting in their homework and being involved in school activities. The parents also continued to discuss developing relationships with the teachers. By the fourth year, the language and cultural challenges were less of a factor. In order to make a smooth transition in to the OSP, one parent commented on being more involved with their child at school:

“I would just tell them to just make sure that they go, and be a part of it, be a part of the solution, be a part of the school, do everything that you can possibly to find out what is going on in your child’s life at school. And listen to your child, listen to what they come home and tell you...”
 (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent Who Withdrew from the OSP, personal interview Spring 2008)

“Be more involved in the school, in the kid, in the program, and be more attentive to having the scholarship people to work with you....You have to be more active with the school and your child and with the scholarship, so you work together with them. You’ll get more, but if you just put your child in this school and think that the school is gonna help your child, you’re wrong. You’ve got to help your child and you’ve especially got to help the school so it can go on, and so other people can get the scholarship.” (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent Who Withdrew from the OSP, personal interview Spring 2008)

In order for OSP families to benefit from their new school communities, they need to be welcomed into them. With the assistance of interactive polling technology, in our fourth year of data collection, we asked parents several questions regarding the extent to which they felt welcomed by key members of the Program and their private school community. The majority of respondents (19 of 30 who answered the question) indicated that other parents at their new school were either very welcoming or at least welcoming during the first

Exhibit 4



year of their participation in the Program (Exhibit 4). These results suggest that most of the focus group participants initially experienced a relatively warm welcoming.

The general warm welcome reported by OSP families masked some important variations by cohort and subgroup. For instance, Cohort 1 parents described receiving a somewhat warmer welcome than did Cohort 2 parents (Exhibit 5). This difference could be explained in part by the fact that many participating OSP schools were under-enrolled at the time that the Program was launched. It is possible that the parents of existing students were excited about the additional financial resources associated with the influx of OSP families. When Cohort 2 joined the Program a year later, many participating schools reached or exceeded their capacity for OSP students and the attractiveness of the Program to existing private school parents may have diminished somewhat.

Several subgroups of parents expressed distinctive patterns of responses regarding how welcoming existing parents were toward their family (Exhibit 6). For instance, parents who spoke Spanish at home universally reported that parents were either very welcoming or at least welcoming toward them. Four of the

Exhibit 5

How welcoming were parents of other students when you first started in the program?

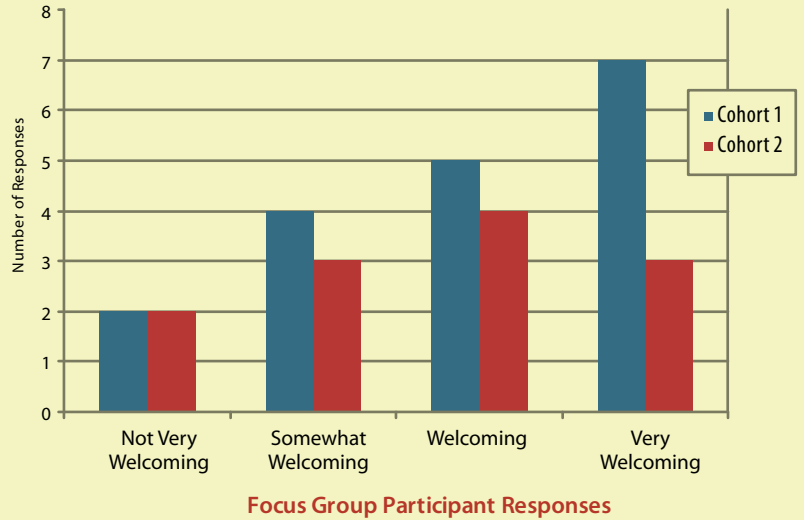
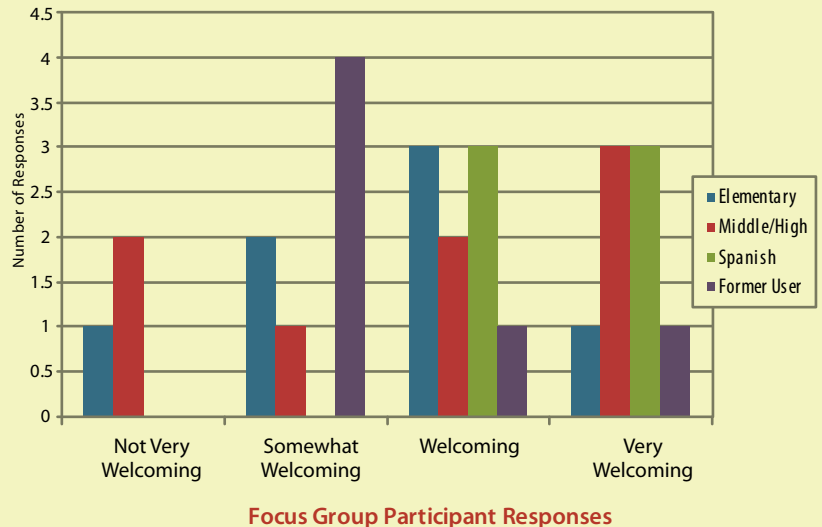


Exhibit 6

How welcoming were parents of other students when you first started in the program?



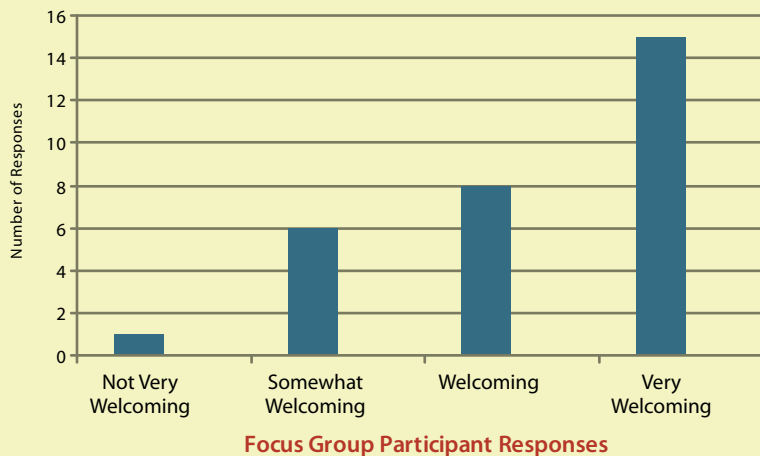
six parents who withdrew from the Program described their reception by existing parents as merely somewhat welcoming, though the two other former participants said other parents were welcoming or very welcoming. One parent of an elementary school student and two parents of middle/high school students said that existing parents were not very welcoming. One of these parents noted:

“...I think they [parents at her child’s school] had a problem more so than him than what the scholarship was creating the problem, and then I didn’t like the attitude that they carried on for the people with the scholarship.” (Cohort I Elementary School Parent Who Withdrew from the OSP, Spring 2008.)

Parents were then asked to consider how welcoming other parents from their new schools are toward them now. Their responses suggest that other parents became more welcoming of the OSP families over time (Exhibit 7). Half of the 30 respondents said that other parents are now very welcoming of their family and only one respondent said that the school community remains not very welcoming. The finding that existing families in the OSP program are more welcoming to scholarship recipients over time is confirmed by the polling, focus groups and personal interviews.

Exhibit 7

How welcoming are parents of other students now?

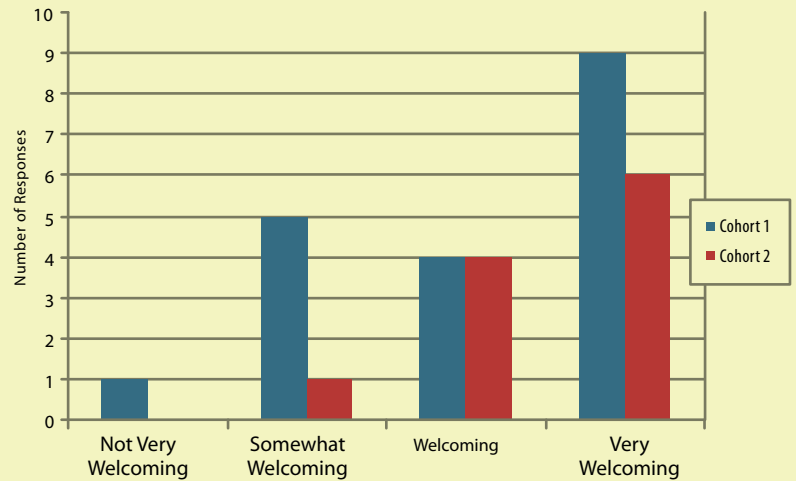


The responses of Cohort 2 families largely explain the evolution in the pattern of responses from primarily “welcoming” to “very welcoming” (Exhibit 8). The Cohort 1 parents reported feeling about as welcome now as they did initially; whereas, the Cohort 2 parents tend to feel much more welcomed in their new school communities now than they felt at the start.

Again, there were some interesting distinctions in the distribution of responses to the “how welcome do you feel now” question by parent subgroup (Exhibit 9). Spanish language and elementary parents all felt either welcome or very welcome three or four years into their experience with their new schools. Four parents of middle/high school students said that parents at their new school are now only somewhat welcoming of them, while two former participants agreed with that assessment and one former participant said that her child’s new school was not very welcoming (before the family decided to withdraw from the Program).

Exhibit 8

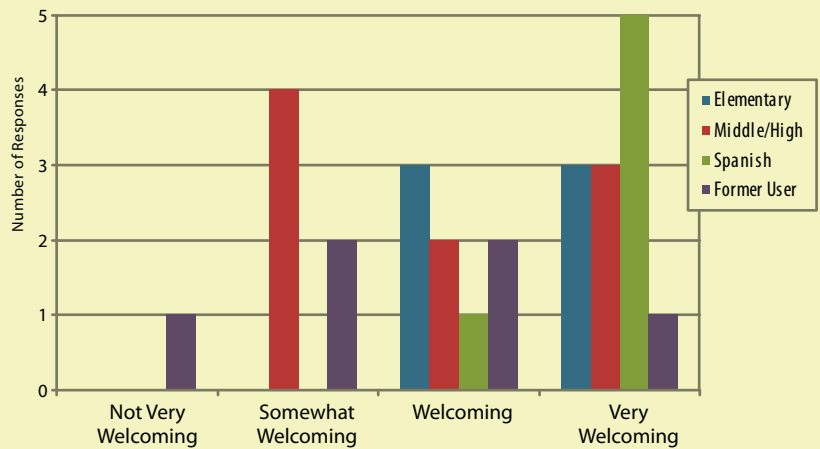
How welcoming are parents of other students now?



Focus Group Participant Responses

Exhibit 9

How welcoming are parents of other students now?



Focus Group Participant Responses



How do parents assess student development and progress?

A. Theory and Previous Research

Parents, scholars, policymakers and other stakeholders are ultimately interested in whether school choice programs are successful. But how do we define “success” in this context? In the public administration field, measures of success tend to be classified broadly as inputs, outputs, intermediate outcomes, and end outcomes.⁴¹ Inputs are the resources available to an organization like a school, such as funding, facilities, location, teachers, and the characteristics of their student body. Outputs include measures such as instructional time and elements of the curriculum covered. Intermediate outcomes for schools include school safety and student motivation to learn. End outcomes are the desired final results of effective organizational operation. For schools, end outcomes include student mastery of skills, achievement gains, and graduation rates.

Evaluations of school choice programs tend to focus primarily or exclusively on end outcomes. In particular, newer school choice options like voucher programs and public charter schools are judged to be successes or failures based in large part on the extent to which they increase student performance on standardized tests. This focus on the end outcomes of schools is justifiable in many respects. However, are test scores how parents judge student success? Most parents interact with their children intimately on a daily basis. For them, it appears subtle behavioral and attitudinal changes are more important than test scores as feedback that their children are doing well or are at least making reasonable academic progress.

Some researchers support the position that student attitudes toward learning are important harbingers of future success, especially soon after they have transferred into a new school community. They claim that positive school cultures produce desirable student behaviors that eventually manifest themselves in student achievement and attainment gains.⁴² It may take several years for the entire process to unfold, however.

B. Summary of Findings in Years 1-3

In the first few years of this study the research team was cautious about discussing with parents topics that were premature, given their new experiences with the OSP. For example, how they rate the conditions for learning within their new schools, or how they measure their child’s academic and social development were such topics. Though academic progress was not raised as a question directly in the first year of the

⁴¹ See especially Harry P. Hatry, *Performance Measurement: Getting Results*, Second Edition (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 2006).

⁴² See especially George A. Akerlof and Rachel E. Kranton, “Identity and Schooling: Some Lessons for the Economics of Education,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 40:4, 2002; Bowles et al, “The Moral Economy of Communities...”, supra note 37.

study, parents rarely spoke of test scores and formal assessments when speaking about other topics such as why they were satisfied with their new school or the Program. Beginning in the second-year focus groups, parents were asked directly how they determined if things were going well academically for their children. In the third year focus groups, both cohorts of elementary school parents cited the level of motivation and enthusiasm their children expressed toward school as their litmus test for student academic progress. The following comments expressed by two elementary school parents support this observation:

“Success is measured at all levels, different levels, if the child has to learn what he has to learn in each class. So my measurement of success is he’s all the time engaged in school, in classes, and homework and then learns what he has to learn in each class. So that’s what I measure. So I think he has learned what he should learn in each class.” (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent, Spring 2007)

“As far as attitude, my children’s attitude has changed.... They have so much involvement in school where by the time they get home all they have time to do is study then get ready to go to bed.” (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent, Spring 2007)

Several Cohort 2 parents also listed “excelling at grade level” – an end outcome -- as their preferred measure of success after two years in the Program. The other indicators described by both cohorts of parents who were several years into the Program focused on factors such as student enthusiasm, feelings, and self-esteem. This was certainly the case for the following middle school parent:

“My youngest, her reading skills had went up tremendously. Before she got to [name of school], she was the type of child, she didn’t socialize a lot. She was quiet, didn’t participate when it came to teacher asking, ‘Raise your hand.’ But now since she attended [name of school], she participates, she raises her hand, she reads a lot.” (Cohort 1 Middle School Parent, Spring 2007)

Since the beginning of the study, Cohort 1 high school families expressed a sense of urgency about the importance of addressing the developmental needs of their children and better preparing them for life beyond high school. The high school parents initially emphasized positive school conditions such as safety, and student attitudes toward learning as their indicators of success. As their children approached high school graduation, these parents began to shift their focus to end outcomes such as student grades, graduation, preparation for higher education, and college plans as measures of student and Program success.

Spanish-speaking parents identified rigorous curriculum, safety, and student interest in school as desirable pre-conditions or intermediate outcomes for future positive student end outcomes of academic achievement. Spanish-speaking parents also stated that important indicators such as mastery of English and behavior inside and outside of school were clear signs of whether or not the Program was working for their child.

An Example of an Unsuccessful Transition

Shielah is a native of Virginia and she moved to the District of Columbia after she completed high school. Her father passed away at an early age and she describes her mother as not providing any support as it pertained to school. However, she felt that her teachers cared more for the children when she was growing up. Her daughter gained admission into the OSP in its second year, but in less than two years she removed her daughter and placed her in a public charter school.

Shielah felt that her daughter's special education needs were a liability when attempting to find a good school. When her daughter enrolled in the private school, Shielah decided not to follow the "IEP" (individualized education plan) that the previous public school put in place for her daughter. Instead, she requested that the new school allow her daughter to repeat the same grade. Also, though she was very interested in the OSP when she first heard about it, she delayed applying to the Program until its second year.

Her experiences with the private school did not work out, but Shielah believes the public charter school has been attentive to her daughter's needs and allows her to grow and develop at a comfortable pace. In contrast, she felt that her daughter experienced culture shock at her private school. She noted that "everything was now a black or white thing and this was something that was created at (the school) . . . I've never experienced anything like that (with her)." At this point, she feels that perhaps her main problem was choosing the wrong school. She does not rule out the possibility of pursuing another private school when her daughter completes middle school.

She recommends that parents remain involved if their children are in private school and make sure they are adjusting. She thinks there will be less disappointment if someone closely monitors participating schools.

C. New Findings from Year 4

By the fourth year, a few parents indicated that they now assess student academic development or progress based on improved study habits and plans to pursue college. The emphasis placed by both students and parents on college plans is reflected in the statement below:

“She’s doing good in school, and she says Mommy I want to continue ...and when I finish I want to go to a university. She’s very interested in college. I don’t have to tell her you have to do your homework or you have to learn something every time she’s coming back home. She starts to do her homework, and she’s doing it on the computer.....she’s learning, learning, learning!”

(Cohort 2 Spanish-Speaking Parent, Spring 2008)

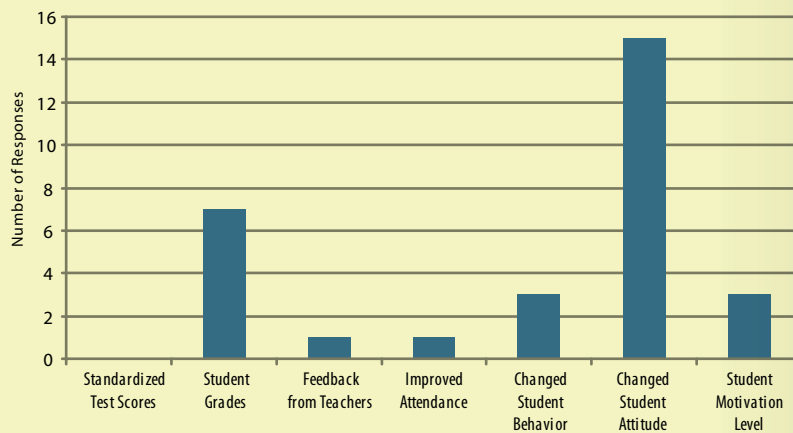
One of the ultimate goals of the OSP is to help improve academic outcomes for students. The vast majority of parents who participated in the interactive polling, however, say that general student attitudinal and behavioral indicators are the primary means by which they evaluate educational progress (Exhibit 10). In fact, half of all respondents polled selected “student motivational level” as the most important indicator of academic success. None of the parents polled selected standardized test scores as the predominant measure of student academic progress. However, approximately one quarter of the parents polled cited student grades as a measure of their child’s

academic development. Based upon the parents’ responses, the positive attitudes and behavior of their child can be viewed as a precursor to student success that will be captured later by standardized assessments. Alternatively, it may indicate that these parents do not place much confidence or credibility in test scores to measure and assess student academic progress.

The responses of Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 parents barely differed regarding how

Exhibit 10

How do you measure or assess your child’s academic improvement?



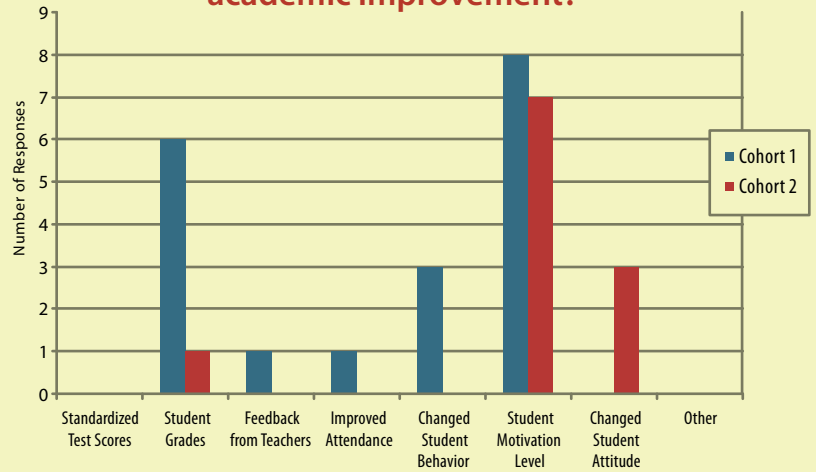
Focus Group Participant Responses

they assess their children’s academic progress (Exhibit 11). Cohort 1 parents were slightly more likely to list student grades as an alternative to student motivation. However the parents of both cohorts identified the criteria for success as intermediate outcomes involving student attitudes, and behaviors versus end outcomes or formal measures such as standardized test scores.

We observed differences across parent subgroups regarding their primary measures of student progress (Exhibit 12). The common response for both Spanish- and English-speaking OSP parents with children in middle and high school was that student motivation level is the most important sign of progress. Elementary school and former participants listed student grades as their primary measure of academic progress.

Exhibit 11

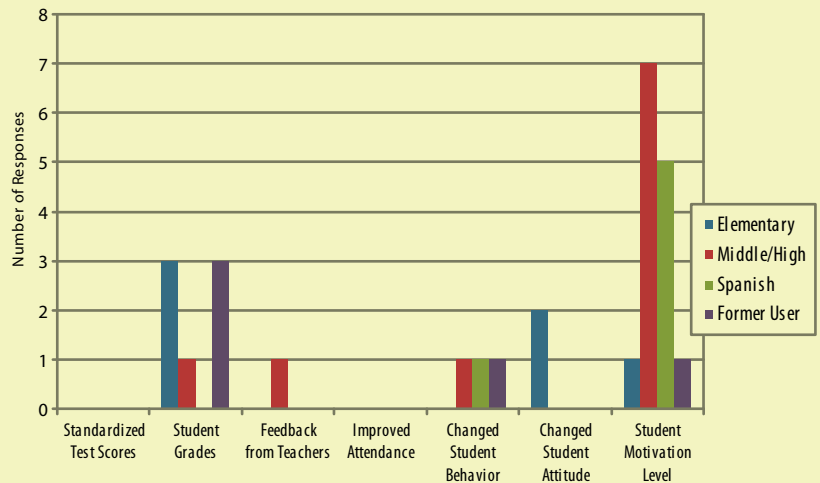
How do you measure or assess your child’s academic improvement?



Focus Group Participant Responses

Exhibit 12

How do you measure or assess your child’s academic improvement?



Focus Group Participant Responses



What are the sources of parental satisfaction?

A. Theory and Previous Research

How satisfied are OSP parents with the schools their children now attend? Virtually every school choice program evaluated to date has reported very high levels of parental satisfaction with choice schools, especially in the initial year of their experiences with choice.⁴³ The literature suggests that satisfaction with the new schools of choice may be higher initially either because the dissatisfaction with their previous schools is freshest at that point or because the charm of the new schools has a tendency to wear off somewhat over time, particularly as parents become more aware of the shortcomings of the school. Satisfaction with choice schools also may vary by the level of schooling, as Godwin and Kemerer report that students were more likely to drop out of the CEO Horizon program in San Antonio when transitioning from middle to high school.⁴⁴

The true source of parental satisfaction with school choice must be specified in order to clearly understand how well choice is operating. Parental satisfaction with a school choice program, and the overall opportunity to choose their children's schools, is an example. Parental satisfaction with a particular school chosen can be another matter. Presumably, if parents are highly satisfied with the school they have chosen, they also are more likely to be satisfied with the program that permitted them to exercise that choice. However, parents who are dissatisfied with the school they chose for their children still might be satisfied with the school choice program that gave them access to other school options.

B. Summary of Findings in Years 1-3

As with other choice programs, parents and students participating in the OSP expressed high levels of satisfaction with both their schools and the Program during the inaugural year. The source of their satisfaction stemmed from what parents and students perceived as greater parental involvement in their child's education, improved safety and stricter discipline, smaller classes, religious-based instruction, enhanced curriculum, and effective support services such as tutoring and mentoring.

One first-year parent expressed the general sentiment of that cohort when she described her most memorable experience in the Program:

“When my son dressed in that uniform with that green blazer, the white shirt, tie, gray trousers and he looked like a gentleman and a scholar and he had his hair cut and his glasses and he was just grinning from ear to ear that he was going to be a part of that [new school culture] and he went to school that day and he was excited about going to school.” (Cohort 1 High School Parent, Spring 2005)

⁴³ For examples see Howell et al, *The Education Gap*, pp. 168–184, supra note 34; John Witte, *The Market Approach to Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁴⁴ Kenneth Godwin and Frank R. Kemerer, *School Choice Tradeoffs: Liberty, Equity, and Diversity*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002, p. 40.

In the second year of the focus groups, the majority of parents cited noticeable changes in their children’s attitudes about learning as the main source of their satisfaction. They often noted an improved disposition toward school and more productive homework and learning habits. Several parents of middle and high school students were excited about their children’s new attitudes toward school.⁴⁵ One parent expressed her satisfaction in the following words:

“I was looking for a different environment for him. My thing was, if he will follow Sally and Sally [is] not into her work, [in private school] he will follow John who gets better grades and that’s exactly what’s happening now.” (Cohort 2 Middle School Parent, Spring 2006)

The majority of Spanish-speaking parents stated their children are more motivated, focused on what they want, and striving for improved grades. Their high level of satisfaction also appears to stem from the fact that several private schools participating in the OSP are more religiously oriented. The Spanish-speaking parents were particularly pleased with the way the schools their children are attending provide incentives for good behavior and academic improvement.

The parents of scholarship students in the first and second years of the program were satisfied with many aspects of their new schools. They noted in particular the greater level of attention that their children received in smaller classes, the content of the curriculum and religious instruction. They also expressed a belief that they would have more social and economic opportunities as a result of participating in the Program. Generally speaking, students also felt more comfortable with the improved safety in their schools.

C. New Findings from Year 4

The vast majority of parents in each subgroup and cohort consistently expressed high levels of satisfaction overall with the OSP. Even in situations where parents complained or expressed disappointment with some aspect of their experience (often problems with individual schools or teachers) that led them to withdraw from the OSP, they still gave the Program high marks.

The high level of parental satisfaction stems from at least three factors. First and foremost, the parents appreciated the fact that they made the choice. One parent expressed these views:

“[The OSP} gives me the choice to, freedom to attend other schools than DC public schools....I’m not really badgering or bashing the system, but right now, well at the time, I just didn’t feel that I wanted to put him in DC public school and I had the opportunity to take one of the scholarships, so therefore, I can afford it and I’m glad that I did do that. (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent, Spring 2008)

⁴⁵ Following is another example: “Before I had to say...you got homework you have to do homework...and now he comes in and does his homework with no slack.” PSV Focus Group, Cohort 1 High School Parent, Spring 2006.

An Example of a Satisfied Family

Kate is a native of a South American country. She speaks fluent English, and describes herself as a “college student.” She was inspired to come to the United States by the potential economic opportunity. She has been most impressed by the way America places children first. She feels education is important because of the comfort and confidence it provides when communicating with others. She also feels that going to college is necessary in the United States because of the type of job opportunities that are available to people with a college degree.

She has one daughter and getting her into the Program was very difficult. When she applied to the school of her choice, her daughter scored low on the placement examination. She pleaded with the school to allow her daughter to retake the exam and she passed on the second attempt. Kate indicated that, while she has some concerns about the private school her child now attends, she is pleased overall with the academics and the way parents are allowed to participate in the social life of the school through events and field trips. Her major concern is the miscommunication she experienced initially with WSF and the schools about what expenses are or are not covered under the scholarship. Also, she sometimes feels that as scholarship recipients, parents are stigmatized by some of the school administrators because they are seen as poor. However, the teachers, she indicates, are excellent and more than make-up for her dissatisfaction in other areas.

When asked if she thinks the Program should be continued, she expressed that it should be. However, she would recommend that the amount of the scholarship be reduced each year that a student participates so that more families could enter the Program and the parents in the Program learn to “save money for daily life.”

Second, many parents report that their children are thriving in the different school environment, for example:

“They really excel at this program, cause I know for a fact they would never have received this kind of education at a public school....I listen to them when they talk, and what they are saying, and they articulate better than I do, and I know it’s because of the school, and I like that about them, and I’m proud of them.” (Cohort1 Elementary School Parent, Spring 2008)

Third, aside from a few minor administrative challenges in the first and second years of the Program, the parents give the Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF) an enormous amount of credit for the way the OSP has

been managed and the care and attention they have received from WSF staff.

Even in situations where the parents transferred their children to another school within the Program or out of the Program altogether, they were more likely to report that they could have done more to select an appropriate school versus complaining that a particular school had not met their expectations.

To further explore this topic, the research team asked a series of polling questions. These questions allowed the respondents to provide additional insights into their previous responses about satisfaction. A total of 23 of the 31 respondents agreed with the statement – “my family is very satisfied with the OSP” (Exhibit 13); 15 of them strongly agreed with the statement. Eight (8) respondents disagreed with the statement, and one of them did so strongly.

Although levels of satisfaction with the OSP were high among both cohorts, our polling results suggest that satisfaction was generally higher among Cohort 2 parents compared to those in Cohort 1 (Exhibit 14). It is possible that the truncated implementation schedule for the first year of the OSP influenced levels of satisfaction for parents in Cohort 1. In the second year, Cohort 2 families had more time to learn about the Program, apply, and search for placements in schools. Moreover, with a year of implementation experience behind them, the parents reported that the Washington Scholarship

Exhibit 13

My family is very satisfied with the OSP.

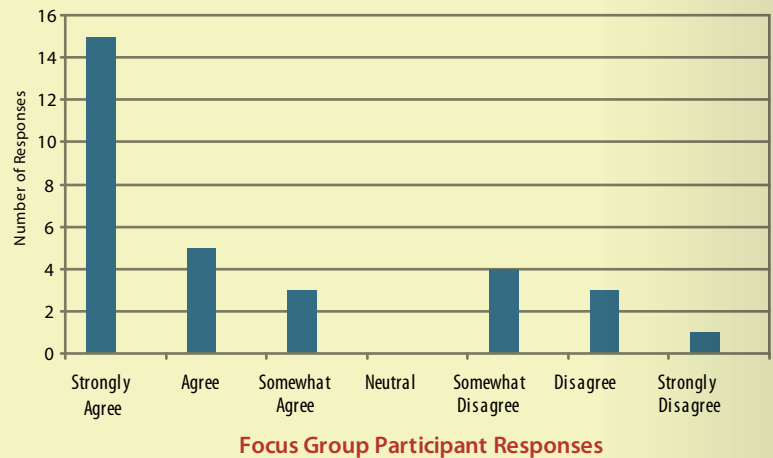
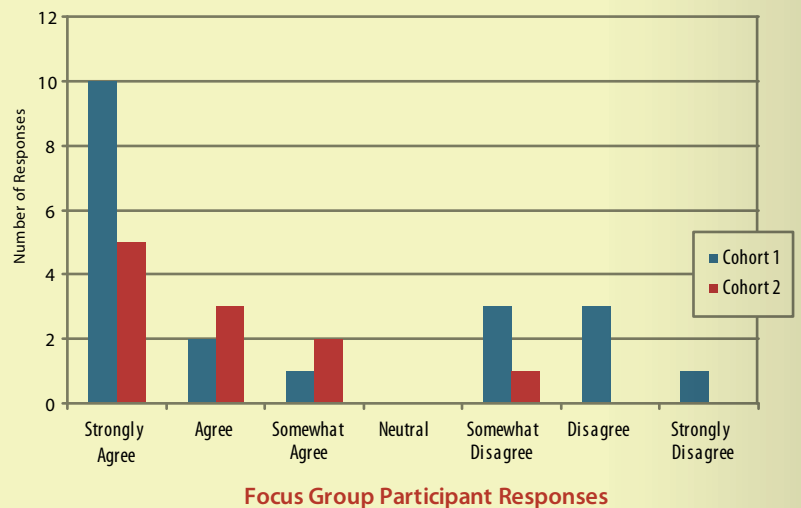


Exhibit 14

My family is very satisfied with the OSP



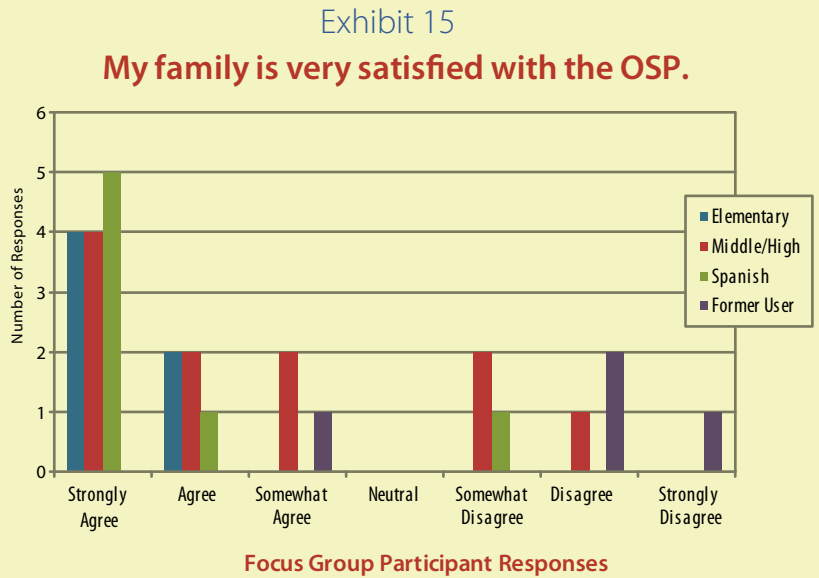
Fund was more efficient in its administration of the Program, in particular by improving financial policies and procedures.

From a subgroup perspective, some parents were more satisfied with the OSP than were others (Exhibit 15). For

instance, the parents of elementary school students expressed the

most consistently high levels of satisfaction with the Program. Open seats were plentiful at the elementary school level throughout the implementation of the OSP, giving parents a variety of school choices, many of which were convenient to their neighborhood. Spanish-speaking parents also were highly satisfied with the Program. Middle and high school parents tended to be satisfied with the OSP, but less so compared to the elementary and Spanish-speaking respondents. As noted earlier in this report, middle and high school students had comparatively few schooling options and available seats, which most likely forced some families to make tradeoffs among fewer school options.

Finally, parents who withdrew from the OSP expressed the lowest level of satisfaction with the Program. Of the four parent respondents who withdrew from the OSP, one selected “somewhat agreed,” two others chose “disagreed,” and one responded “strongly disagree” to the satisfaction statement. However, some of the parents who withdrew from the OSP expressed their approval of the overall Program.





Are focus groups an outlet for expression?

A. Theory and Previous Research

Families chose to participate in the Opportunity Scholarship Program because they were interested in an alternative educational environment for their children which they believed they could not access by way of traditional public or public charter schools. In essence, they were pursuing and entering a different educational and social community. A critical element of community is reciprocity. When an effective learning environment is created for and additional services are often provided to member families, something, whether explicit or tacit, is expected of them in return.⁴⁶

In this section, we attempt to capture the level of willingness of OSP parents to engage or join other members of the school community in activities that communicate or express their opinions about the Program. Since the OSP is up for reauthorization in 2009, we decided to assess how the parents might share their experiences (beyond the focus groups) and express their opinions about the Program with others. In fact, their willingness (or lack thereof) to more publicly and directly engage Congress, the new President, a relatively new mayor, and other influential stakeholders could strongly influence the fate of the Program.

Lower-income and working-class urban individuals and families traditionally have relatively low rates of political activism.⁴⁷ In some respects this is understandable, as such groups tend to face major life challenges and experiences that diminish their willingness and ability to be actively involved in the broader community. Though perhaps understandable, the potential lack of political activism demonstrated by lower-income urban adults is regrettable because it is specifically linked to the inability of such groups to shape public policy in ways that serve their interests.⁴⁸ Having participated in the OSP over the past three or four years, and having expressed high levels of satisfaction with the Program, a logical question emerges – Are OSP parents sufficiently motivated to take action to support the Program’s continuation?

The parents in this study were certainly willing to participate, which required being involved in an annual series of focus group discussions and personal interviews. Our final question to parents in the fourth year focus groups sought to determine whether participation in this study was a burden or benefit to them and, if a benefit, what was advantageous about sharing their experiences. More indirectly, their responses provide some insights about whether parents feel they have an outlet to express their views about the OSP.

⁴⁶ See especially, Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Doubleday, 1969); Alistair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); Bryk et al, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, supra note 34; John E. Brandl, *Money and Good Intentions are Not Enough* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1998); George A. Akerlof and Rachel E. Kranton, “Identity and Schooling: Some Lessons for the Economics of Education,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 40, 2002, pp. 1167-1201.

⁴⁷ E. E. Schaatsneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967); Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); James S. Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore, *High School Achievement: Public, Catholic, and Private Schools Compared* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); Richard G. Niemi and Jane Junn, *Civic Education* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon and Shuster, 2000).

⁴⁸ Piven et al, *Poor People’s Movements*, supra note 47; David Greenstone and Paul E. Peterson, *Race and Authority in Urban Politics: Community Relations and the War on Poverty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

B. Summary of Findings in Years 1-3

Parents were first asked about their willingness to share their experiences with the OSP publicly and with decision-makers in year 3 of the data collection. The elementary school parents were very receptive to expressing their views on the OSP to policy makers. During the first three years of this study, a core group of Cohort 1 parents have consistently attended the focus groups. The parents in this core group appeared to experience a noticeable change in their concerns about the OSP from school selection issues toward advocacy

An Example of a Dissatisfied, Yet Continuing Family

Joyce and Larry are married and appear to be in their mid-40's. They have been in the United States for about five years and are originally from East Africa. They both speak English with a heavy accent, but Larry has a very good command of his second language. Joyce is soft-spoken and shy. She said very little during the interview, so most of the responses were provided by Larry. At one point he encouraged his wife to speak but she simply blushed or spoke very quietly.

The oldest of their three children, who they describe as very hardworking, has graduated from high school. He used the scholarship for three years. Their other two children remained in private schools during the 07-08 school year. The family is leaving the current school and will transfer to another private school next year. Joyce and Larry are leaving the private school because they believe the teaching standards are declining and they feel dwindling resources are to blame.

Their primary reason for pursuing a private school for their children is the religious component of the education. Although they define themselves as Orthodox Christian, they feel the Catholic school is morally compatible with their religious views. Also, Larry feels that private schools will provide his children an edge within an increasingly competitive global economy.

Joyce and Larry agree that they were considered middle class in their native country but they essentially started from scratch in the United States. As a new immigrant, Larry often feels invisible and powerless over his economic situation. Therefore, he views the OSP as priceless. In fact, he notes that the scholarship relieves some of the discomfort he feels as a shuttle bus driver for a local university. He feels that the Program is needed more now than before because the mayor will have a lot to do to turn around schools. He ended the conversation by noting a need to increase funding for scholarships at the high school level, and he continued to express his gratitude for the OSP.

of continuation of the OSP. Elementary school parents in both cohorts indicated that they would be active in making their voice heard on the pending reauthorization of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program. The parents in Cohort 1 were particularly enthusiastic about influencing OSP policy.

“We still need school choices for our children until things are better as far as the public school is concerned. So we’re going to have to lobby.” (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent, Spring 2007)

When asked what kinds of public expressions of support parents would be willing to make, most focus group participants said that they preferred to write letters and testify before Congress or the City Council rather than participate in other forms of expression, such as lobbying and voting.

Two to three years into their school choice experience, parents said that they appreciated the opportunity that has been provided to them and their children and would be most comfortable expressing that appreciation through individual acts of testimony to decision makers.

C. New Findings from Year 4

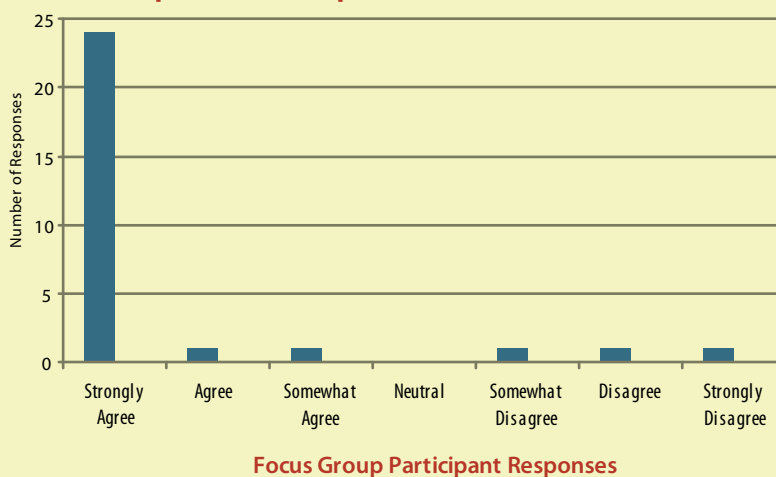
Finally, in our fourth year of data collection, parents provided feedback regarding the extent to which this qualitative research project might have served as a vehicle for them to share their experiences in constructive ways. Some parents seemed very reluctant to express their views directly to school officials, particularly if their comments might be perceived as negative by teachers and administrators. Moreover, many of the families reported that they were not actively involved with a parent organization.

For most of these families, participating in the focus groups was a way to convey their experiences, thoughts, and feelings about the Program. For example, 24 of 29 parents “strongly agreed” with the statement – “The focus groups allowed my family to thoughtfully express our experiences with the OSP”

(Exhibit 16). This was not surprising because many families expressed this sentiment throughout the study, and many of these respondents were more likely to attend the final session during which they were polled on this question.

Exhibit 16

The focus groups allowed my family to thoughtfully express our experiences with the OSP



The extent to which parents found the focus group to be helpful was one of the few sets of polling responses that did not vary by cohort (Exhibit 17).

Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 parents, whose experiences with the Program differed in significant ways on other topics, equally viewed the focus group experience as highly valuable. The parents who withdrew their children from the Program, ironically, represented the subgroup that was most appreciative of the opportunity to share their experiences via the focus groups (Exhibit 18). All four of them who answered the question said they “strongly agreed” that the sessions allowed them to thoughtfully express their opinions and experiences regarding the Program. It appears that these parents particularly valued the non-judgmental nature of the study and other parents who were willing to hear them out as well as share a different perspective.

Despite the parents’ level of participation in the study and satisfaction with the focus groups as a viable outlet for communication, there were few signs that they were involved in civic activities beyond the focus groups. Most parents across all subgroups and cohorts expressed little to no involvement with other activities and organizations beyond their direct involvement with their children. This lack of involvement may be explained in part by the fact

Exhibit 17

The focus groups allowed my family to thoughtfully express our experiences with the OSP.

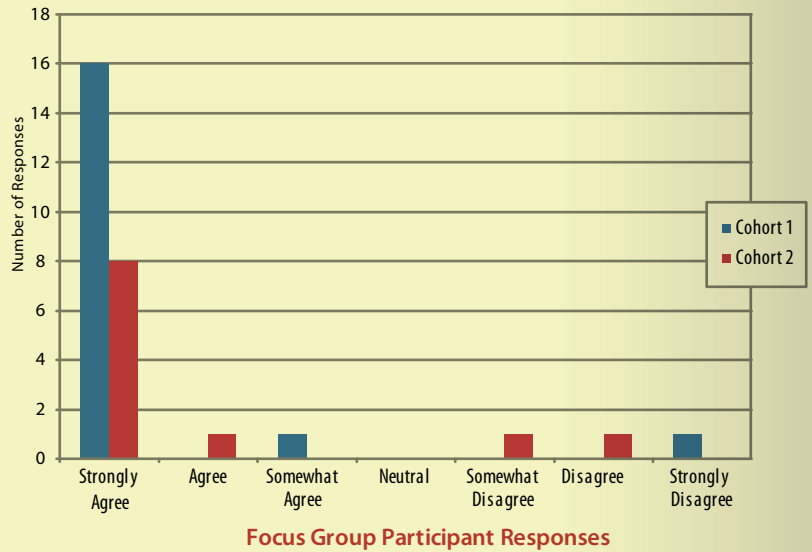
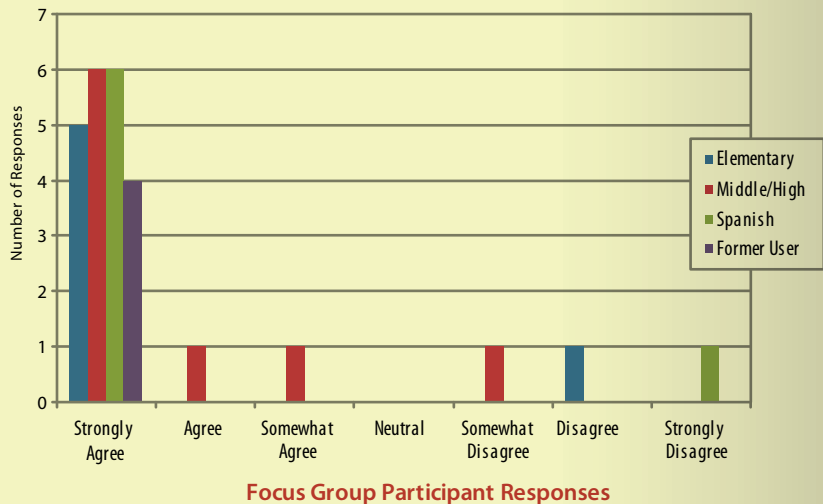


Exhibit 18

The focus groups allowed my family to thoughtfully express our experiences with the OSP.



that most parents participating in the study reside in distinctly different areas or neighborhoods of the city. Thus, there are few opportunities for them to come together in a way that allows them to focus exclusively on their common interests as participants in the OSP in general and members of the schools their children attend specifically.

There is another very important observation about the focus group sessions that is worth noting. In each focus group it was very common during and after the session to witness parents exchanging comments and contact information with one another. Given the fact that most parents who participated in the study reported that they were not members of or involved with a parent organization, it appeared that the focus groups provided parents with an opportunity to share their experiences with other parents in the OSP and also with a social networking opportunity



What recommendations do parents have to improve the Program?

A. Theory and Previous Research

*The business community has long viewed customer feedback and suggestions as highly valuable information. Many of our stays at hotels or dining experiences end with a request that we evaluate the quality of the product or service and provide suggestions for improvement. Customer feedback is an explicit and essential element of Total Quality Management (TQM), the aggressive management approach pioneered by Deming,⁴⁹ first used to help post-war Japan's industries recover, and later adopted extensively in the U.S. Applied to government programs such as the OSP, TQM should include "Close communication with customers to identify and understand what they want and how they define quality."⁵⁰ In their bestselling book, *Reinventing Government*, Osborne and Gaebler argued that, to be effective, modern government must be "customer driven."⁵¹ The best way to determine what customers want and need but are not getting is to ask them.*

*Requesting feedback from customers encourages them to "voice" their concerns. Hirschman, in his seminal work *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, claimed that customer voice can enable clients to improve the service that they are receiving without having to endure the burdens of exiting the program or company for another one.⁵² Hirschman claims that, upon hearing customers voice complaints, "management... engages in a search for the causes and possible cures of customers' and members' dissatisfaction."⁵³ Presumably, organizational managers will seek to address the voiced complaints of customers in order to dissuade them from exiting the organization and taking customer resources with them. Although Hirschman describes how voice can serve as an alternative to exit, and also reinforces the power of exit, it seems likely that the threat of customer exit renders their voice more influential in shaping the actions of management. Why listen to customers with nowhere else to go?*

In the context of the OSP, participants had various potential opportunities to communicate their preferences through both exit and voice. Simply by taking the time and effort to apply for an Opportunity Scholarship, participating families revealed an interest in and willingness to explore educational options beyond the District of Columbia public and public charter school systems – i.e. to employ an educational "exit" option. Having used the OSP to enroll their children in a specific school of choice, they were in a position to direct their voice toward improving the education the school was providing to their children. If that school option failed to meet their expectations or was lacking in any way, they could exit and pursue a different participating school if satisfactory improvements were not made. OSP families had the ability to voice concerns about the Program itself to the

⁴⁹ See for example: W. Edwards Deming, *Out of Crisis* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁵⁰ Steven Cohen and Ronald Brand, *Total Quality Management in Government* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), p. 5.

⁵¹ David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government* (New York: Plume, 1992), Chapter 6.

⁵² Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 36-38.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Washington Scholarship Fund and leave the OSP if the Program did not satisfy their needs. Finally, the participants in our focus groups were provided the opportunity to voice their concerns about the Program to us and, through our reports, to the broader public.

B. Summary of Findings in Years 1-3

Based on the focus group feedback from parents in general and specifically the recommendations they made pertaining to improving financial policies and procedures, many participating schools addressed and improved the quality of their interactions with participating families. Compared to the feedback or, in some cases, criticism expressed by parents in the inaugural year, the majority of parents interviewed during the second year sincerely felt their voices were heard, and they appreciated how these matters were being managed by WSF and the participating schools.

However two concerns that were frequently expressed by the parent were not addressed by Congress, the DC Mayor’s Office, the US Department of Education, participating schools or the program administrator. First, parents repeatedly requested an independent entity to evaluate and monitor the schools. In addition, some parents hoped that this entity would also hold participating schools accountable for delivering the services and programs they advertised. Second, they expressed a strong desire for efforts and policies that would open up more slots for students at the middle and high school levels. As many of the students moved from elementary and middle school to middle and high school, there was consistent demand for more private school slots. These issues are discussed in greater detail below.

In the first year of the Program, several parents recommended that the schools and WSF take measures to reduce the “singling out” of scholarship students. There was a significant difference in the perceptions of parents in the second year regarding the receptivity of teachers, school officials and other parents to new scholarship students. In stark contrast to the finding reported in the first year about students being “singled out,”⁵⁴ parents generally reported feeling very comfortable in the second year of the OSP.

This might suggest that one or a combination of changes occurred between the first and second years of the Program. One possibility is that the Cohort 1 and 2 families were better prepared for the challenges and opportunities associated with their new schools, suggesting that families were gradually feeling

more comfortable as their time in the Program progressed. Another possibility is that there was a more conscious and concerted effort by the participating schools and WSF to better honor family confidentiality and extend a warmer welcome to OSP families.

Policy makers were also very responsive to one of the parents’ most pressing concerns -- that the eligibility requirements be changed to address their fears of “earning out” of the Program. In December of 2006, Congress amended the DC School Choice Incentive Act to increase

⁵⁴ Stewart et al, *Parent and Student Voices on the First Year...*, pp. 33-35, supra note 12.

the continuing eligibility requirements from 200 percent of the poverty line to 300 percent of the poverty line for families who were already enrolled in the Program.

In the first two years of the Program parents also requested special orientation sessions for families utilizing the scholarship and recommended that a parent organization comprised of OSP families be established. Near the end of the second year of the Program the WSF helped to facilitate the creation of a parent empowerment group that was open to all participating families. However the majority of parents participating in the study were either not aware of the empowerment group or chose not to become members because they did not view the mission of the organization as completely aligned with their individual interests.

The parents in the second and third years of the Program consistently voiced their concern over the dearth of slots in participating private schools, particularly at the high school level. The parents recommended that policy makers address the inadequate number of school opportunities within OSP. With large numbers of OSP students rising toward the middle and high school grades, the availability of school slots and information about schools became more important than ever for many families. This general sentiment is reflected in the following exchange between two parents:

“I just simply want to say that’s probably what I’m dissatisfied with most. Once you become part of the scholarship fund they should allow you to stay a part of [OSP] so that you can see the success stories. Cause what’s the point of getting your kids in here, they succeed, and then you have to pull them out?” (Cohort 1 High School Parent, Spring 2006.)

“[Students are] out of the school because you no longer are eligible or there’s no space? My daughter... I had to pull her out because of a space issue... it was a space thing - I couldn’t find a high school.” (Cohort 1 High School Parent, Spring 2006)

C. New Findings from Year 4

The two major concerns that reverberated throughout the last three years of focus groups continued in the fourth year. First, a sizeable group of parents recommended that an independent entity evaluate and monitor the schools in the program. Second, the majority of parents cited a dearth of slots at the middle and high school level. In a novel recommendation, one parent also asserted that the students should be better “matched with the schools.”

The suggestion pertaining to an independent school evaluator was spontaneously mentioned by several parents in personal interviews, as reflected by the following comment::

“If Washington Scholarship Fund [the program administrator] better investigates participating schools and continues to monitor them, there will be less disappointment.” (Cohort 2 Elementary School Parent Who Withdrew from the OSP, Spring 2008)

During the personal interviews, some parents provided more detailed examples of why a monitoring system by an independent entity was needed. Generally speaking, they were concerned that some of the participating schools did not have qualified teachers nor the core features of the program they advertised to OSP parents. In addition to better monitoring the schools, a few parents recommended screening prospective parents or families with a goal of better matching students with the appropriate school, as reflected by the statement below:

“Well it’s an excellent program if the parents could be interviewed. Give them an intensive profile interview, take a look at the child, find out what other schools are parents actually looking at. What schools they are interested in, and just find out whether or not those schools meet that child’s qualifications.” (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent Who Withdrew from the OSP, Spring 2008)

A small number of parents in the Cohort 1 focus groups called for establishing more schools that were gender-specific for girls. One parent noted the following during that focus group discussion:

“I wish there were more private schools for girls, there’s another school that is just for boys.” (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent, Spring 2008)

Second, the majority of parents interviewed consistently recommended that the number of slots for students in the OSP be increased. One parent remarked:

“Only problem I had was with this difficulty in finding a school once she’s in high school- if I put her in the scholarship program in high school. They didn’t really offer too many choices to go to. You really wouldn’t have a choice in high school. And then we’re having to see if pretty much we can deal with that.” (Cohort 2 Middle School Parent, Spring 2008)

Throughout the four years of the study, parents were consistently given opportunities to express their opinions regarding how the Program could be improved for them and their children, as well as for other families that might receive an Opportunity Scholarship in the future. Surprisingly, parents rarely mentioned or requested support for themselves. The parents consistently mentioned the need for ancillary student support services in the form of tutors and mentors. The parents are concerned that their children need additional support with homework and managing other demands and pressures outside of school - such as negative peer influences.

In summary the most often cited recommendation or request by the parents was for an “independent entity” that would be responsible for ensuring that participating schools meet some predetermined set of standards.

This independent entity could also ensure the reliability of information participating schools shared with families. Placing greater emphasis on matching students with schools may lead to invaluable benefits for both the educational community and the families. The dearth of slots for middle and high school students continues to threaten the continuity of “choice” for families engaged in the Program.





Conclusions

Publicly-funded school voucher programs remain highly controversial. One reason why the public remains conflicted about school vouchers is because few people think they know enough about such programs. This study illuminates several key aspects of the OSP from the unique perspectives of its participants. Their insights and experiences should inform the public discourse about the impact of education reform in general and the potential role of publicly-funded vouchers more specifically.

Against this backdrop, the research team's greatest challenge required placing the families' individual experiences with the OSP into a broader context. Beyond the fact that all of the participating families lived in the District of Columbia and were at or below 185 percent of the poverty level when they applied for the OSP, there was considerable variation with regard to their family background and circumstances. As we illustrated with the vignettes, some families are new immigrants from East Africa and Central America, while others migrated to the District of Columbia from different parts of the United States. Some are native Washingtonians who have experienced at least two generations of poverty while others were experiencing recent economic hardship. In light of the range of circumstances surrounding the participants, the questions boiled down to: How does the study place the participants' experiences into a richer context and maintain the authenticity of their individual voices? And, from the vantage point of these families, what was learned that can inform the debate about school vouchers as a means to address the needs of low-income families?

By the end of the second year of data collection it became very clear to us that the vast majority of the families were moving from a marginal role as passive recipients of school assignments to active participants in the school selection process in very practical ways. For example, they were being challenged to collect information about several schools; review this information and use it to refine their choices; and eventually visit schools and engage teachers and administrators in a completely new fashion. This type of thinking and behavior is commonly associated with other big-ticket purchases like homes or cars. Yet, the average family in the OSP does not own a home or car and often has not acquired some of the transferable experiences and skills that are involved with these transactions.

This realization suggested that most OSP parents were essentially moving from the margins to the center of their children's academic development. Each family was expected to educate themselves about the pros and cons associated with their school options and to make a choice. Thus, we adopted a consumer framework for thinking about and describing their experiences with discrete aspects of the OSP.⁵⁵ Many of our findings and observations were confirmed during our interviews with WSF staff members.⁵⁶ The importance of information, the transition

⁵⁵ Less directly, our decision was influenced by the fact that the literature on school choice is strongly influenced by economic research grounded in a free market interpretation of parent involvement.

⁵⁶ As a final step in the research and data analysis processes, each year we interviewed the staff of the WSF. We typically interviewed them after the data analysis was completed. We used our discussion with them to verify comments made by the respondents or to seek clarity on some issues. An interview with WSF was conducted for this report on November 10, 2008.

process, and the true source of satisfaction are good examples of findings brought to light by the families themselves in the course of our research and are worth briefly revisiting here.

A Closer Look at Information

The information gathering process presented the families with a unique dilemma. On one hand, most parents understood the need for and often requested as much information about schools as possible. On the other hand, they often reported feeling overwhelmed by the responsibilities associated with assessing the validity and reliability of that information, a parental reality confirmed by the staff of the WSF.

There is a critical need to distinguish between (1) access to information and (2) possessing the skills and competencies necessary to process that information and use it to make an informed school choice. Given that most OSP parents lacked experience with school choice, it should come as no surprise that they were most overwhelmed by the time and effort involved with school visits, teacher interviews and other more intimate aspects of selecting schools. Their repeated request for an independent entity to help them in these areas is a strong source of evidence about the challenge of exercising choice.

The WSF reported that they recognized the desire on the part of OSP parents for an entity that could assist in verifying the information provided by participating schools as well as monitor their performance during the academic year. The WSF attempts to provide parents with extensive information about their schooling options, hosts informational events and school fairs, and facilitates access to other resources. However, the staff at the WSF is mindful that many of the responsibilities that might be associated with an independent entity are beyond the scope of their administrative role. They reported that they often have a good sense of the “character and mission” of most of the participating schools, but they do not presume to know whether a school is a “good fit” for individual students and families. They strongly encourage parents to first visit any school they are considering and suggest that they ask the school personnel certain questions before formally enrolling their child. They believe that the final school choice must be made by the parents or families.

The Challenges Associated with the Transition

The families experienced a transition from marginal and relatively inactive consumers of schools to individuals who were expected to play an active and central role in the school selection process. The families made it abundantly clear that Program administrators, in this case the Washington Scholarship Fund, play an indispensable role in supporting their transition. In addition to the participants, the WSF reported that the families relied on them to provide a host of support services ranging from completing applications to securing tutors and more. For example, student tutorial support has been one of the most

frequently requested resources. Because some schools do not provide tutors or do not allow private tutors in their buildings, the WSF has facilitated efforts to provide tutorial services to students and other resources to families through partnerships with community based organizations like the East of the River Family Strengthening Collaborative. In order to fully meet the needs of low income families that participate in future voucher programs, Program sponsors must be provided with or should be prepared to secure the resources necessary to help participating families adjust to the challenges they may experience moving from public to private schools.

The True Source of Satisfaction

Though parents have reported high levels of satisfaction each year, a burning question remains – What is the true source of their satisfaction with the Program? At this stage of the program, it appears that parent satisfaction stems more from the opportunity to make a choice for their child’s education and participate in the Program, rather than from concrete academic test results or grades or other outcomes. The parents repeatedly expressed that the scholarship represented an “opportunity” to pursue what they perceived were better schools or schools that were more conducive to providing the type of learning environment most appropriate for their children. Though empirical evidence of student academic achievement and social gains resulting from the OSP is limited to date, most parents were confident that it was just a matter of time before their own child would realize clear benefits from the program.

The families with students in the upper grades may never truly know the full potential impact of the OSP. Only a modest number of school slots are available to OSP students in high school grades, and the majority of those slots are in a single participating private school. At the high school level, the OSP currently offers most parents merely a choice between their assigned public school and one specific private school, not the extensive and diverse set of school choices available to younger OSP students.

For parents with children who began the Program in the early grades, the general satisfaction they reported in the first four years of the OSP could give way to frustration and disappointment as the 1,325 students who entered the program in grades K through 5 enter middle and high schools.⁵⁷ The greatest concern or worry expressed by these families is the shortage of slots for participants at the upper grade levels. The WSF acknowledged that there is a dearth of high school slots and believes they have made every attempt to increase the number of options available to OSP families. However, short of allowing families to pursue high school options outside the District of Columbia, there are no other immediate solutions to the shortage. It appears that the shortage of slots in private high schools is a citywide problem.

⁵⁷ Wolf et al, *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Second Year Report on Participation*, Table 3-7, p. 20, supra note 4.

In closing, for the parents in our study, finding the right school appears to be an enterprise that transcends their children’s education. For most parents, it is an opportunity to lift the next generation of their family out of poverty. As many parents noted during the personal interviews, the scholarship represents an opportunity for their children to acquire the skill sets and benefit from the reputation they assume are fundamental to a quality private school experience.⁵⁸ The significance of the OSP is reflected, in large part, by the sacrifices the parents reported they have made or might be willing to

make to maintain their income or residential eligibility for the Program. The clearest message from the pioneering DC parents in our study is that, as long as limited-quality school options exist within high poverty areas of America, there will be a need to provide low-income families with access to and support for pursuing nontraditional school options.

⁵⁸ Their assumptions about education as a means of rising out of poverty are debatable. For examples, see: Tom Hertz, “Rags, Riches, and Race: The Intergenerational Economic Mobility of Black and White Families in the United States,” in *Unequal Chances: Family Background and Economic Success*, ed. Samuel Bowles, Herbert Gintis, and Melissa Osborne Groves (New York: Russell Sage Foundation; Princeton University Press, 2005).



Appendix A – Research Methodology

Here we discuss in detail the qualitative research method that we employed in this four-year longitudinal study of the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP). Specifically, we describe:

- The basic methodology used
- Its motivation and purpose
- Specific data collection protocols and instruments
- How participants were selected and grouped
- Patterns of response to data collection
- How we decided what quotes and themes to include in our reports
- Our process for external peer review

This approach was designed to produce a valid and reliable picture of the experiential reality of families participating in the nation’s first federally-financed school voucher program.

Definition and Motivation

Our core research method is qualitative and falls under the general category of phenomenology. Phenomenology is the concept of promoting understanding by authentically documenting and communicating to readers the lived experiences of study participants.⁵⁹ It is a non-evaluative and non-judgmental research method in that there are no normatively “good” or “bad” results in phenomenological research. Qualitative research such as this should be judged solely based on the extent to which it effectively brings alive the actual experiences of its subjects. Thus, what we present here is a *study* of the DC OSP but not an *evaluation* of that Program. To the extent that we convey messages of satisfaction or disappointment, it is merely to report important elements of the experiences of participants that have been communicated to us by them. We do not conclude that the Opportunity Scholarship Program is good or bad. We do not conclude that the OSP necessarily caused the conditions and opinions that we document. We acknowledge that the Program exists and describe what its existence and operation means, in human terms, for participating families.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, Second Edition, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003, p. 15; John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 1998.

⁶⁰ For another example of the use of phenomenological research to study an education reform see, for example, Keith Nitta, Marc Holley, and Sharon Wrobel, “A Phenomenological Study of School Consolidation,” Education Working Paper Archive, University of Arkansas, 2008, available at <http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/EWPA/Research/Leadership/1805.html>.

This study uses a qualitative approach, as opposed to a quantitative one, to engage parents for several reasons. First, the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences already has contracted for and is overseeing a scientifically rigorous quantitative evaluation of the OSP. We saw no value in seeking to duplicate those important activities. Second, the voices and lived reality of inner-city families are often left out of studies of school choice. Phenomenological studies such as ours help people to better see what life is like for families that have received an Opportunity Scholarship, thereby shedding light on the hypotheses that can and should be explored as well as the limitations to what we

might reasonably expect from the outcomes of implementing this particular program. Third, although we did not initially foresee it as reason to launch our qualitative study, we quickly came to recognize that the recommendations of Program participants, as articulated to us and documented in our reports, subsequently led to improvements in the OSP.⁶¹ Finally, we also came to realize that our focus group and interview sessions were valuable experiences of personal expression for the parents and students that participated. We continued our study for four years partly to deepen our understanding of their experiences but also to provide them with opportunities to continue to express to us, and through us to the world, their perspectives on what it is like to embark upon a journey of school choice.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Since our goal was to understand, to the best of our ability, the lived reality of our study participants, we employed a variety of qualitative and mixed-methods approaches in an attempt to triangulate to that reality. The three specific methods used were moderated focus group discussions, semi-structured individual interviews, and interactive wireless polling. We discuss each of these methods below.

1. Moderated Focus Group Discussions – Our initial and primary data collection strategy was to conduct traditional focus group discussions moderated by experienced qualitative researchers. We implemented a total of 37 focus groups through the course of our research, 12 in year 1, 12 in year 2, 7 in year 3, and 6 in year 4 (exhibit A1). A total of 29 focus groups were with parents of scholarship recipients. The remaining 8 focus group sessions were with middle and high school scholarship students. The purpose of the focus groups was to present topics and questions to parents and older students who had received OSP scholarships and provide them with opportunities to share with us their thoughts, opinions, and experiences (exhibit A2).⁶² A key goal of the initial round of focus groups was to build trust between the participants and the research team in order to encourage their future involvement in the study. The focus group sessions ran about 90 minutes, and moderators ensured that all focus group participants made substantial contributions to the discussions. The focus group sessions in years 1-3 were tape recorded and fully transcribed. The main points made during the sessions in year 4 were recorded in real time by note-takers.⁶³

2. Semi-structured Individual Interviews – We augmented our focus group data with information from 36 semi-structured interviews of parents (34) and high school students (2). A total of 23 interviews were conducted in year 2 of the study and the remaining 13 were

⁶¹ For example, in our first report we conveyed the common opinion of parents that the financial policies and forms employed by the OSP lacked consistency and transparency. The Washington Scholarship Fund, the organization in charge of implementing the Program, subsequently revised and clarified their financial procedures, much to the satisfaction of participants. Stewart et al, *Parent and Student Voices...*, p. A1, supra note 12.

⁶² Focus groups have been used as an effective tool for measuring the impact of public policy. See for example: Dyer, "Researching the Implementation of Educational Policy..." pp. 45-61; Morgan, *Focus Group as Qualitative Research*; Shamdassani, *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*, supra note 11.

⁶³ All five year 4 focus groups took place in the same large meeting room, in order to take advantage of the wireless interactive polling technology. As a result, note-takers were employed instead of tape recorders, which would have picked up a lot of background noise.

implemented in study year 4. The central purpose of the individual interviews was to provide participants with an environment, completely free from any possible peer influences, in which to discuss with us their personal and educational reality in the wake of receiving an OSP scholarship.⁶⁴ Importantly, we first established a substantial degree of trust between the researchers and the study participants through our successful focus groups in year 1 before we attempted the more intimate interviews in years 2 and 4. The individual interviews provided us with an opportunity to ask more personal questions of our participants regarding various challenges in their lives that might be directly or indirectly affecting their experience in the OSP (exhibit A3). All of the interviews were conducted by six members of the research team with special training and experience in interviewing techniques. In most cases we were able to match interviewees with interviewers of the same race and ethnicity. The interviews were all tape recorded and fully transcribed.

3. Interactive Wireless Polling – Finally, in year 4 of our study, we invited our study participants to a large meeting room in a downtown Washington hotel to “poll” them regarding their OSP experience. A total of 38 substantive questions were projected, one at a time, onto a display screen and each participant was asked to select a response from a fixed list using a handheld wireless keypad device (exhibit A4). Aggregate response totals for the group appeared on the screen after the polling closed for each question, and participants were given an opportunity to discuss the results at their specific focus group tables and with the entire group of participants.

One important feature of our three methods of data collection is that they varied in the degree to which participants felt anonymous in providing their responses. As an academic study, all participants were promised that their full identity and comments would be kept in complete confidence by the research team. We kept that important promise of confidentiality throughout the study. Nevertheless, the comments of individual participants, though confidential, were delivered to the research team in contexts that were more or less anonymous for the individual. Focus groups – even those such as ours that included peers who participants did not know personally – are social forums in which participants may feel varying degrees of confidence in providing open and honest answers to questions. Individual interviews remove the peer pressure element from the environment but still require the participants to communicate information directly to another person – in this case the interviewer. The wireless interactive polling method, though situated in a room full of people, ensures the highest degree of response anonymity, as participants are simply casting their vote for a specific answer.

We found that the data from all three of these mixed-methods evidence-gathering techniques reinforced the major findings of our study. Although each method had its strengths, weaknesses, and unique contributions

to the research, the lessons we drew from our research did not vary based on the specific technique used. Participants may have been more or less forthcoming depending on the data collection instrument, but the information gathered from one method never contradicted the data acquired from another method. Our triangulation approach clearly worked.

⁶⁴ Most of the interviews were conducted by a single, trained interviewer, although some of the interviews in year 2 included a secondary interviewer for training purposes.

Selection and Grouping of Participants

We attempted to draw a participant sample that was highly representative of the entire population of OSP families. Even though our study is not a causal analysis or quantitative program evaluation, we employed various techniques commonly used in such studies to enhance the representativeness of the findings that we present here.⁶⁵ Most families participating in the OSP entered the Program in two large application cohorts – cohort 1 in 2004 and cohort 2 in 2005.⁶⁶ They include students that, at application, were entering the elementary, middle, and high school grades.⁶⁷ About 9 percent of OSP families claim Hispanic ethnicity.⁶⁸ To portray the lived reality of OSP families, we would need to include representatives of all of these important clientele groups. In addition, the experience of the OSP could easily differ depending upon the language a family speaks at home or the grade level of private school in which a child is using a scholarship.⁶⁹ We therefore implemented a stratified random sampling technique, stratifying on student grade-level at application and language spoken at home, in drawing our study participants from cohorts 1 and 2.

Of necessity, we employed slightly different recruitment and selection techniques for cohorts 1 and 2. During the fall of 2004, the Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF) hosted a general orientation for first-year families. WSF allowed the research team to introduce the study and invite interested parents to complete a simple consent form that included information about the grade-levels of their children participating in the OSP and the language spoken most often at home. The study was also publicized by WSF in follow-up correspondence to parents, including many who did not attend the orientations. A total of 230 cohort 1 families, out of about 900 families that entered the OSP in that first cohort, volunteered for the study. A total of 15 participant families were randomly selected from this pool to fill each of our four sample strata:

1. Spanish language (student in any grade),
2. English language student in elementary,
3. English language student in middle school, and
4. English language student in high school.

Our cohort 1 participant sample therefore included 60 families.

The fall of 2005 brought a second large cohort of families into the OSP. The WSF did not hold a single orientation for these Cohort 2 families, instead relying on mailings, a high school orientation session, and a

⁶⁵ We acknowledge having been significantly influenced by the efforts of Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba in this regard. In their book, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), they argue that qualitative researchers can and should enhance the internal and external validity of their studies by employing scientific strategies of case selection and sampling that are commonly employed in quantitative analysis.

⁶⁶ Wolf et al, *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Two Years*, Table 1, p. xv, supra note 4.

⁶⁷ Wolf et al, *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Second Year Report on Participation*, Table 3-4, p. 14, supra note 4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, estimated from Table 3-5, p. 18.

⁶⁹ Separating participants by the language they spoke at home was also logistically important, as it permitted us to conduct focus groups and interviews in the native language of all participants.

monthly series of parent empowerment meetings to help them acclimate to the Program.⁷⁰ The WSF allowed representatives of the SCDP research team to present at the high school orientation and the December 2005 empowerment meetings. They also again permitted us to include an insert in one of their mailings to all cohort 2 families that described our study and invited families to participate. A total of 32 cohort 2 families volunteered for the study at the high school and empowerment group meetings and an additional 60 families volunteered in response to the mailing. We had few volunteers to draw from within two categories of our selection stratification system: Spanish language (any grade) and English speaking high school students. We enrolled all 13 cohort 2 Spanish language family volunteers and all 7 cohort 2 English language high school student family volunteers into our study. We then randomly selected 15 English language elementary student families and 15 English language middle student families from those oversubscribed categories to give us a total of 50 cohort 2 study participants. The 110 families from cohorts 1 and 2 thus selected to participate in the study represented approximately 180 students that received scholarships from the OSP.

We held separate focus group discussions with the middle and high school students in our participating families during years 1 and 2 of our study. Only a small number of students – 18 in cohort 1 and 17 in cohort 2 – participated in one or more of our student focus groups.⁷² Most of these teenage students were hesitant to share much information about their experiences. As a result, the student focus groups were discontinued after the second year of the study and, from that point on, our research focused exclusively on contributions from parents.

As our longitudinal study progressed, the OSP students in some of our study families dropped out of the Program. By year 4, our study sample included enough parents of former scholarship users in cohorts 1 and 2 that we organized them into their own topical focus group for the final session.

⁷⁰ The high school orientations were run by Capital Partners in Education, an organization in the District that has for decades provided privately-funded scholarships for low-income students to attend participating private schools and that was a partner with the WSF in securing the contract of implementation of the OSP.

Patterns of Response

The response rates for our study varied over time and across certain subgroups of participants. Such patterns of response are typical of longitudinal studies of a fixed panel of participants. Parent participants were given a \$50 gift card for each focus group session or interview they attended throughout the study. Middle and high school students were provided a \$20 gift card for each focus group session they attended in years 1 and 2. Families were sent letters and postcards, and were contacted by phone, to encourage their response to each data collection event.

Response rates were high for both cohort 1 and cohort 2 participants initially. For the first set of cohort 1 focus groups in the fall of 2004, our 60 participating families were comprised of 65 parents of whom 39 (60 percent) actually attended their appointed focus group session.⁷¹ For the first set of cohort 2 focus groups in the spring of 2006, 25 of 50 invited parents (50 percent) actually turned out.⁷² The sample of cohort 1 and 2 parents who initially participated in our focus groups was generally representative of parents in the OSP on important characteristics such as the number of children in their household and the ward in which they reside.⁷³

Turnout for our annual focus groups decreased over time. For example, the Cohort 1 English-speaking parents of high school students comprised a focus group of 13 parents in the fall of 2004 but just 8 parents by the spring of 2006 (year 2) and 6 by the spring of 2007 (year 3). Family mobility was a significant factor in the turnout decline, as many families became unreachable by mail and phone. Of the participating families we were able to contact, more than half of them turned out for the focus groups throughout the study.

A core group of parents, especially from cohort 1, consistently attended all five of our focus groups. Fourteen of 35 respondents to our year 4 polling question about the number of focus groups they attended answered “5,” which represented the maximum number possible (exhibit A5). Generally, turnout over time was stronger for cohort 1 compared to cohort 2 (exhibit A6), English-speaking parents had greater attendance rates than Spanish-speaking parents, as did the parents of former scholarship users compared to continuing scholarship users (exhibit A7). We view it as especially important that these parents of former scholarship users were eager to share their opinions, experiences, and frustrations during the final year of the study.

Finally, we concluded the data collection with a set of in-depth individual interviews with families. The goal of the final interviews was to gather additional contextual information about families and construct more accurate profiles of them and their experience with the OSP. As phenomenological research, it is important to bring the participants “alive” for readers so that they can better understand the experiences of these families. A stratified sampling was employed as a technique to ensure that all relevant study subgroups were represented. Within categories, however, we did not select interview targets randomly but purposively. For example, we interviewed two parents of former users that we knew had a number of complaints about the OSP to balance out interviews with two parents of former users that we knew had a very positive experience with the Program. Of the 16 parents invited to interviews, 13 responded (including six English-speaking parents of continued scholarship users, three Spanish-speaking parents of continued scholarship users, and four English-speaking parents of former scholarship users) and were interviewed.

⁷¹ Stewart et al, *Parent and Student Voices...*, p. A1, supra note 12.

⁷² Cornman et al, *New Education Consumers...*, p. B3, supra note 13.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. B5; Stewart et al, *Parent and Student Voices...*, pp. A2-A3, supra note 12.

Decision Rules for Inclusion of Material

To ensure the authenticity of our portrayal of the OSP experience, we used only first-hand participant accounts as our data. To enhance the extent to which the stories we convey are representative of the experiences of OSP families, we employed a series of strategies to distinguish common experiences from isolated ones. We only featured the common experiences of participants in our reports. Following is a summary of the various approaches that were used over the course of this study as screens to identify common experiences of our participants:

- **Year 1** – Team charting was used to document and tabulate the responses of each focus group to each study theme. Two or three research team members independently reviewed each focus group transcript and entered parent responses in the cells of a matrix (exhibit A8). After completing their individual charts, the members met as a group to resolve differences and arrive at a consensus team chart of focus group sentiments and specific quotes that captured common themes.
- **Year 2** – *In vivo* coding was used especially to compare responses within and across cohorts. *In vivo* is a content analysis software program that searched through our compilation of transcripts to find common phrases and themes for analytic grouping. It represented a “mechanical” form of the team charting that we employed in year 1.
- **Year 3** – We experimented with a simple method of flip-chart recording of focus group responses in year 3. The main theme of the year 3 report was change over the course of the OSP experience.⁷⁴ We reviewed the team charts from year 1 and recorded the responses of each focus group to key questions. We then pre-positioned that information on the “hidden” pages of flip charts prior to the start of the year 3 focus group session. During the session, we asked each group to respond to the old year 1 questions given their current experiences of the OSP. We recorded the distribution of the year 3 responses on a fresh flip-chart page, revealed the two pages to the group and asked them to comment on the similarities and differences between their year 1 and year 3 responses.
- **Year 4** – The success of our use of flip-charts to record the common opinions and experiences of focus group participants in year 3 led us to employ the more systematic wireless interactive polling technology in year 4. This more precise and anonymous form of gauging participant responses allowed us to associate a specific frequency with each response category and explicitly compare the distribution of responses by cohort and topical focus grouping.

⁷⁴ Stewart et al, *Satisfied, Optimistic, Yet Concerned...*, supra note 14.

A significant advantage of using multiple information gathering and data analysis techniques is that it allowed the research team to verify the findings. Almost all of the findings that we have reported over the years have been identified consistently across all four of these methods. Each year we encountered a few cases where a particular parent made a distinctive statement, positive or negative in character, about the OSP. If we were not able to identify other parents across the focus groups that

made comments similar to that one, we did not include it in our reports. We are confident that our use of these analytic methods to identify the common responses from our participants has ensured that our findings are not driven by quirky individual experiences or isolated participant statements. These methods have ensured that the authentic first-hand accounts that we reveal and discuss are representative of the experiences of the families participating in our focus groups.

We concede that the families who volunteered to participate in our study and who turned out consistently for focus groups and interviews are not likely to be completely representative of the families and experiences of the OSP as a whole. Therefore, we do not claim that all OSP families shared in these experiences or hold these opinions, or that families participating in a different school choice program in another city would have similar experiences. We only claim that we have collected, identified, and conveyed to readers the actual opinions and stories representative of the large and diverse set of OSP families that have shared their educational reality with us. This is how *they* experienced the nation’s first federally-financed school voucher program. The experiences of other families in the OSP or families in other school choice programs could be different.

External Peer Review

To ensure the quality, clarity, and balance of the reports, we subjected all of them to a peer review process before finalizing and releasing them. Many of the reviewers were members of the Research Advisory Board of the School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP), a panel of highly accomplished education researchers with the overall charge of providing advice and quality control regarding the research activities and research products of the SCDP. Board members Laura Hamilton of RAND, Jeffrey Henig of Columbia University’s Teachers College, Margaret Raymond of the Hoover Institute at Stanford, and Robert Yin of the COSMOS Corporation, all experts on the substance and methods of this research, have provided peer review for one or more of the qualitative reports. We have supplemented the reviews of these advisory board members with outside perspectives from John Bishop of Cornell University, Howard Fuller of Marquette University, Jelani Mandara of Northwestern University, Mark Schneider of the American Institute for Research, and Paul Teske of the University of Colorado-Denver.

All of our peer reviewers have provided extremely useful comments for the improvements of report drafts. We have attempted to address as many of their concerns and implement as many of their recommendations as possible before printing and releasing our reports. Any remaining mistakes or shortcomings of this research are entirely the responsibility of the authors.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ We provide more details about the vignettes in the Methods Section (see Appendix A).

Exhibit A1 – Calendar and Composition of Focus Group Sessions, 2004-2008

Group	Fall 2004	Spring 2005	Spring 2006	Spring 2007	Spring 2008	Total
Cohort 1 Spanish-speaking Parents	x	x	x	x	Combined cohorts	4.5
Cohort 1 Elementary School Parents	x	x	x	x	x	5
Cohort 1 Middle School Parents	x	x	x	x	Combined w/high	4.5
Cohort 1 High School Parents	x	x	x	x	Combined w/middle	4.5
Cohort 1 Parents of Former Users					Combined cohorts	0.5
Cohort 2 Spanish-speaking Parents			x	x	Combined cohorts	2.5
Cohort 2 Elementary School Parents			x	x	x	3
Cohort 2 Middle School Parents			x	Combined w/high	Combined w/high	2
Cohort 2 High School Parents			x	Combined w/middle	Combined w/middle	2
Cohort 2 Parents of Former Users					Combined cohorts	0.5
Cohort 1 Middle Students	x	x	x			3
Cohort 1 High School Students	x	x	x			3
Cohort 2 Middle Students			x			1
Cohort 2 High School Students			x			1
Totals	6	6	12	7	6	37

Exhibit A2 – 2004 Fall Parent Focus Group Moderator’s Guide

December 14, 2004

I. Greetings (5 minutes)

Good evening. My name is xxx. Thank you for coming to participate in today’s focus group.

The purpose of our group is to get your opinions about your experiences with the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program.

Your thoughts will be useful in helping to improve the program.

If you have participated in focus groups before, you know how the process works.

We encourage you to express your views freely. There are no right or wrong answers.

Let’s discuss some of the ground rules before we begin. We will have an informal discussion during which I will ask some questions. We would like to know what each of you thinks.

I will ask other staff in the room to introduce themselves:

They are here to observe and take notes. All of your comments are confidential and will never be connected to you in any way. Only group results will be reported. To ensure that we get everything you are saying, an audiotape recording is being made of this session. The tape enables us to focus on having a free-flowing conversation with you and less on hand note taking. WE WILL START THE TAPE RECORDER NOW.

II. Introductions (5 minutes)

Ok, let's get acquainted by going around the table and introducing ourselves, giving only our first name. I will start, by saying again that my name is _____.

III. Focus group questions (70 minutes)

Theme 1 – Exercising Choice

Question 1

What motivated you to apply for the DC Choice Scholarship Program?

- How did you find out about the program?
- Before you learned about this program, what effort had you made to pursue other education options for your child(ren)?

Question 2

What did you look for in selecting a school for your child(ren)?

- Did you involve your child in the selection process?
- Who did you rely on for information about different schools?
- What source of information was most helpful to you in selecting the school that your child(ren) attends?

Theme 2 – Parents critique of the program and recommendations for improvement:

Question 1

What have been the most beneficial aspects of the program thus far?

- Do you feel that your child is performing better in his/her new school?
- What recommendations would you make about getting the word out about this program to other parents?

Question 2

What haven't you liked about the DC Scholarship program?

- Have you encountered any obstacles to participating in the program?
- What, if any, are your concerns about enrolling your child in a non-public school?
- What recommendations would you make to the program administrators about the program?

Break – 10 minutes

Theme 3 – Understanding parent attitudes and beliefs about their different roles:

Question 1

What role should parents have in promoting and supporting education within the home?

- How involved should parents be in selecting the school(s) their child attends?

Question 2

What is the role of parents in the schools their child attends?

Theme 4 – Parent support needs and advice to other parents

Question 1

What support will you need to successfully help your child(ren) adjust to his/her new school?

- How satisfied are you with the amount of information that you are receiving from your child's private school?
- What advice would you give parents like you who might be interested in the scholarship program?

Question 2

At this point, do you think your child will remain in his/her new school for the rest of the year?

- How important is your child's experience with his/her new school to your decision to keep them in the program?
- What recommendations would you make about getting the word out about this program to other parents?

IV. Wrap-up and Closing (10 minutes)

Now that you had a chance to hear one another's perspectives on the issue of parent support, what other comments or questions do you think we need to discuss this evening?

Did anyone have any final comments or questions?

Thank you all for coming today. We appreciate the time you took to sit down and share with us. Your opinions have been very informative.

Total Planned Time: 90 minutes

Exhibit A3 – 2005 Parent Personal Interview Moderator’s Guide

December 3, 2005

I. Greetings and overview (5 minutes)

My name is xxx. Thank you for coming to participate in today’s interview.

- The purpose of this interview is to document your family’s experiences with the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program.
- Your thoughts will be useful in helping to improve the program and increasing your likelihood for success.
- If you have participated in an interview before, you know how the process works - we encourage you to express your views freely and remember there are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions.
- I will ask other staff in the room to introduce themselves.
- They are here to observe and take notes.
- All of your comments are confidential and will never be connected to you in any way. Only group results will be reported. To ensure that we get everything you are saying, an audiotape recording is being made of this session. The tape enables us to focus on having a free-flowing conversation with you and less on hand note-taking. *WE WILL START THE TAPE RECORDER NOW.*

II. Interview questions (25 MINUTES)

Theme 1: How is the OSP influencing the academic and social development of the students? (5 minutes)

Central question

What are the greatest change(s) you have noticed in your child’s academic performance and social development since he/she enrolled in the Program?

Probing questions

- What best explains [repeat whatever response(s) parent gives to the previous question] you have noticed in your child?
- What does your child say about his/her experiences in their new school? How does he/she describe it?

Theme 2: What role are the parent(s) and other adults playing in the student’s social and academic development? (7 minutes)

Central question

Are both parents actively involved in the child’s development? Are there other adults actively involved in your child’s academic and social development?

Probing questions

- Are you active in your child’s school? How often and in what ways?
- How often and in what ways are you involved at home?
- What role do other family members and friends play in your child’s academic and social development?

Theme 3: How are broader social-economic forces impacting OSP families? (7 minutes)

Central question

Consider your current housing, employment, and health care circumstances for a moment- which one poses the greatest challenge to your family?

Probing questions

- How is the situation impacting your family?
- What support does your family need to address the issue(s) you just described? Where have you gone or where might you go to express your need for additional resources?

Final question:

Is there anything we did not discuss that you think is important to share during our remaining time? (6 minutes)

Exhibit A4 – 2008 Focus Group and Polling Questions

1.) In what city do you currently live?

- Alexandria, VA Richmond, VA
 Atlanta, GA Washington, DC
 New York City

2.) How old are you?

- 18 – 25 36 – 40 51 – 55
 26 – 30 41 – 45 56+
 31 – 35 46 – 50

3.) What is your favorite form of entertainment?

- Listening to music Exercise
 Movies Travel
 Sports Watching TV

4.) What is your relationship to the student you are representing today?

- Mother Foster parent
 Father Family member
 Grandparent Other

5.) What is the gender of the child that you are representing?

- Male
 Female

6.) What grade is your child currently attending?

- 3rd 6th 9th 12th
 4th 7th 10th
 5th 8th 11th

7.) Which type of school did your child attend before the OSP?

- Public Private
 Public Charter Other

8.) How many children in your family originally received the Opportunity Scholarship?

- 1 3 5
 2 4

9.) How many of your children are currently utilizing the Scholarship?

- 1 4
 2 5
 3 0

10.) How many focus groups related to this study have you attended?

- 1 3 5
 2 4

11.) Where did your family reside when you entered the Program?

- Ward 1 Ward 4 Ward 7
 Ward 2 Ward 5 Ward 8
 Ward 3 Ward 6 Other

12.) In what part of the City does your family currently reside?

- Ward 1 Ward 4 Ward 7
 Ward 2 Ward 5 Ward 8
 Ward 3 Ward 6 Other

13.) What is the significance or importance of the scholarship to you and your family?

- Educational opportunity Exposure to diversity Religious exposure
 Financial help Rigorous curriculum Ample resources
 Safety Improved student performance Higher expectations of students

14.) How do you measure or assess your child's academic improvement?

- Changed student attitude Feedback from teachers
 Changed student behavior Standardized test scores
 Student motivation Level Improved attendance
 Student grades Other

15.) What are the best indicators of your child's academic progress?

- Improved attitude toward school Improved behavior
 Improved study habits Improved grades
 Completing homework on time Improved standardized test scores
 Improved attendance Other

16.) In retrospect, what were the most helpful sources of information?

- Brochures Meeting administrators
 School fair School directory
 School visits Information sessions with WSF
 Advice from other parents Other
 Meeting with teachers

17.) What were the greatest challenges your family experienced with the Program?

- Choosing the right school for your child
- Increasing your parental involvement
- Transportation
- Meeting the new academic standards
- Increased student work load
- Navigating financial procedures
- Adjusting to the new school student code of conduct
- Maintaining residency in D.C.
- Other

18.) How welcoming were the teachers and administrators at your child’s school when you first started in the Program?

- Not very welcoming
- Welcoming
- Somewhat Welcoming
- Very welcoming

19.) How welcoming were parents of other students when you first started in the program?

- Not very welcoming
- Welcoming
- Somewhat Welcoming
- Very welcoming

20.) How welcoming are the teachers and administrators now?

- Not very welcoming
- Welcoming
- Somewhat Welcoming
- Very welcoming

21.) How welcoming are parents of other students now?

- Not very welcoming
- Welcoming
- Somewhat Welcoming
- Very welcoming

22.) Has your child ever been “singled out” because they are receiving an Opportunity Scholarship?

- Yes
- No
- Don’t know

23.) If so, was the situation addressed by a school administrator?

- Yes
- No

24.) Based on your experience, was it necessary to make special allowances for your child?

- Very unnecessary
- Somewhat unnecessary
- Necessary
- Somewhat necessary

25.) Has your involvement in your child’s academic life increased since your child entered the program?

- Much More Involved
- Somewhat More Involved
- Same Level Of Involvement
- Less Involved

26.) Do you currently volunteer your time to school activities?

- Yes
- No

27.) Are you an active member of a parent organization at your child’s school?

- Yes No

28.) If you answered yes to the last question, what is your level of activity in this parent organization?

- Very active Active Somewhat active Not active

29.) What were your child’s greatest academic challenges before entering the OSP?

- Reading basic skills Social skills Student attitude about learning
 Reading comprehension Discipline Not being challenged academically
 Math Behavior Ineffective teaching

30.) What were the greatest challenges your family faced while in the Scholarship Program?

- Transportation Pressure from their peers in the neighborhood
 Not prepared for the academic challenges Other
 Student was not excited about attending the school

31.) What support systems are necessary for your child to succeed?

- Individualized attention in the classroom Better communication with teachers
 Mentoring Other
 Tutoring

32.) Who or what was your greatest source of support within the Program?

- Other parents A parent organization Teachers
 School administrators WSF Other

33.) What resources or supports would have helped you to play a more active role in your child’s experiences within the OSP?

- Transportation assistance Family support Support from the school Other
 Tutorial support More funding Support from WSF

34.) My family is very satisfied with the OSP.

- Strongly Agree Agree Somewhat Agree Neutral Somewhat Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

35.) The OSP improved since your child entered the Program.

- Strongly Agree Agree Somewhat Agree Neutral Somewhat Disagree Disagree Strongly Disagree

36.) What is the primary source of your satisfaction?

- My child’s academic development
- My child’s confidence level
- My child’s safety
- My child’s plans for college
- Quality of the school my children now attend
- Other

37.) If you were to leave the OSP, in what type of school would you most likely enroll your child?

- Another private school in D.C.
- Public school outside of D.C.
- Public school in D.C.
- Public charter school outside of D.C.
- Public charter school in D.C.
- Other
- Private school outside of D.C.

38.) Aside from the education of your child, what is the most significant issue facing your family?

- Housing
- Transportation
- Employment
- Other
- Health Care

39.) My family’s financial situation has improved since we enrolled in the OSP.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Neutral
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

40.) What option is your child most likely to pursue after high school?

- Employment
- Two year college
- Military
- Employment training program
- Four year college
- Not sure
- Certificate program
- National service
- Other

41.) The focus groups allowed my family to thoughtfully express our experiences with the OSP.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Somewhat Agree
- Neutral
- Somewhat Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Exhibit A5 – Number of Focus Groups Attended, Aggregate

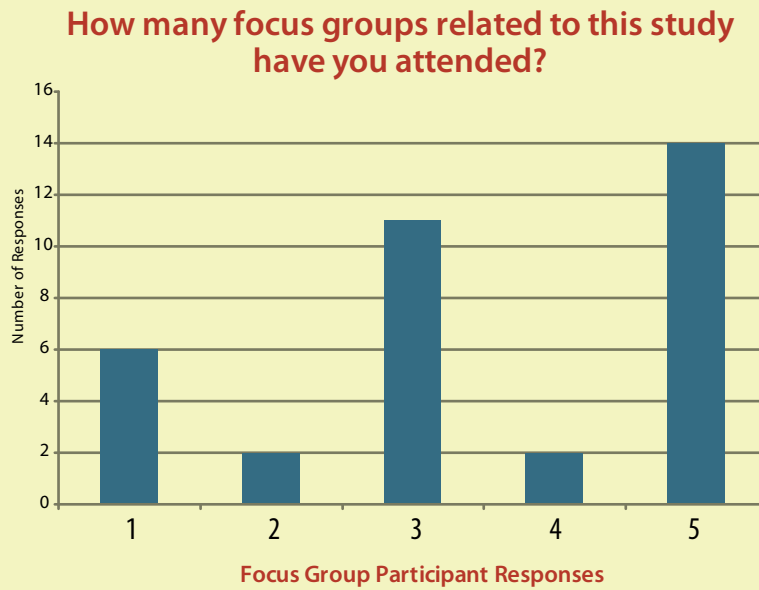


Exhibit A6 – Number of Focus Groups Attended, by Cohort

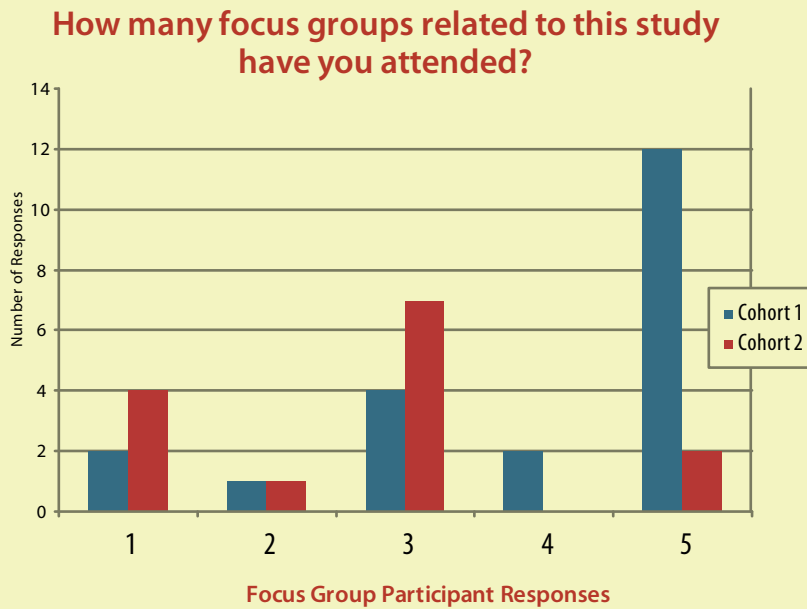


Exhibit A7 – Number of Focus Groups Attended, by Topical Group

How many focus groups related to this study have you attended?

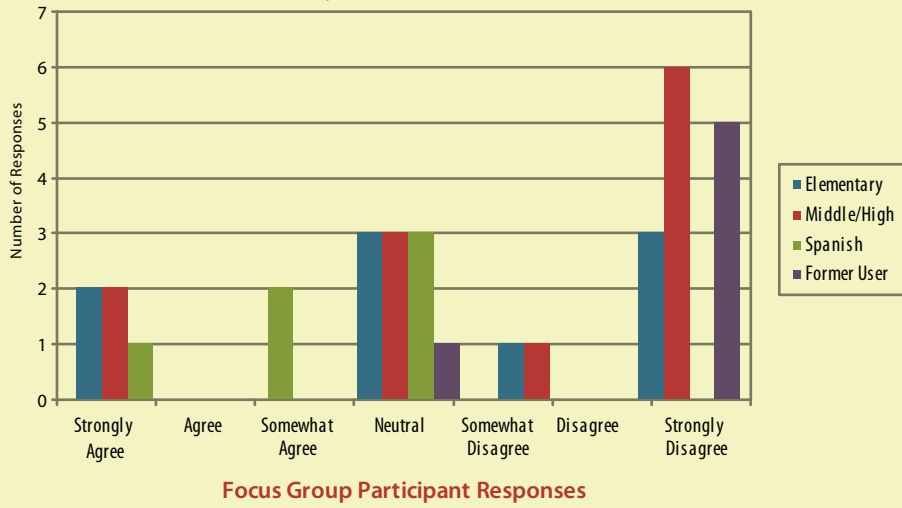


Exhibit A8 – Personal Interview Schedule

1. About the interviewee

- What can you share with us about you and your family that we don't already know?

Could you tell us a few things about yourself, for example:

- Where are you originally from?
- What type of school did you attend growing up?
- What was the highest grade you completed?
- What did you like most and least about your K-12 experience?
- How are your child's experiences similar to or different from what you remember about yours?
- What are similarities and differences between the role your parents played in your academic development and the role you play in your child's?
- What do you do professionally?

➤ About the academic development of the student

- What can you share with us about your child's academic development that we don't already know?
- Aside from OSP and any other schools your child has attended, could you describe what might be the ideal learning environment for your child(ren)?
 - How close does your child's current school come to the ideal?

➤ About the family's experience with the schools

- What can you share with us about your family's experience with your new school that we don't already know?
 - How has the OSP changed the way you think about schools?
 - Was choosing schools through the OSP harder or easier than you expected? Why do you think that was so?

➤ About family satisfaction with OSP

- What would you like to share with us about your satisfaction with OSP that we don't already know?
 - If another parent approached you seeking advice about OSP, what would you say to them?
- Policy makers are trying to decide whether to expand the OSP, continue it only for the students currently using scholarships (in other words, phase it out), or end it immediately. What should they do? Why?

➤ About outlets for expression and feedback (Optional – if there is time left.)

- How often do you share your experiences with the OSP with others?
 - Who exactly have you shared your experiences with?
 - What aspects of your experience do you find yourself sharing the most?

About the Authors



Senior Research Associate **Dr. Thomas Stewart** is Principal of Qwaku & Associates. In 1994 he became the first graduate of the University of the District of Columbia to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard University. His research, consulting and other professional activities have focused on improving the quality of life for under-resourced children and families. He has held senior executive or board member positions with the Black Alliance for Educational Options, Edison Schools, LearnNow, the National Black Graduate Student Association, Parents International, the SEED Public Charter School, and Symphonic Strategies.



Principal Investigator **Dr. Patrick J. Wolf** is Professor of Education Reform and Endowed Chair in School Choice at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. He is principal investigator of the School Choice Demonstration Project and is leading a national research team engaged in comprehensive evaluations of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. Wolf has authored, co-authored, or co-edited two books and more than two dozen articles and book chapters on school choice, special education, public management, and campaign finance. In 1998 he received the “Best Article Award” from the Academy of Management, Public and Nonprofit Management Division. A 1987 graduate of the University of St. Thomas (St. Paul, MN), he received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Harvard in 1995.



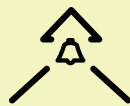
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Kenann McKenzie-Thompson's research interests include community development and urban school reform. She has worked in federal education policy at the committee advisement level, formerly working for the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance. She has also worked as an academic counselor and study skills lecturer at Georgetown University. She has presented numerous conference papers on the federal role in education and school reform. Ms. McKenzie-Thompson completed her BA at Cornell University, M.Ed. at the University of Virginia and is currently a PhD candidate at Teachers College, Columbia University, in the Politics and Education program.



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