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# Satisfied, Optimistic, yet Concerned: Parent Voices on the Third Year of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program

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# Satisfied, Optimistic, Yet Concerned:

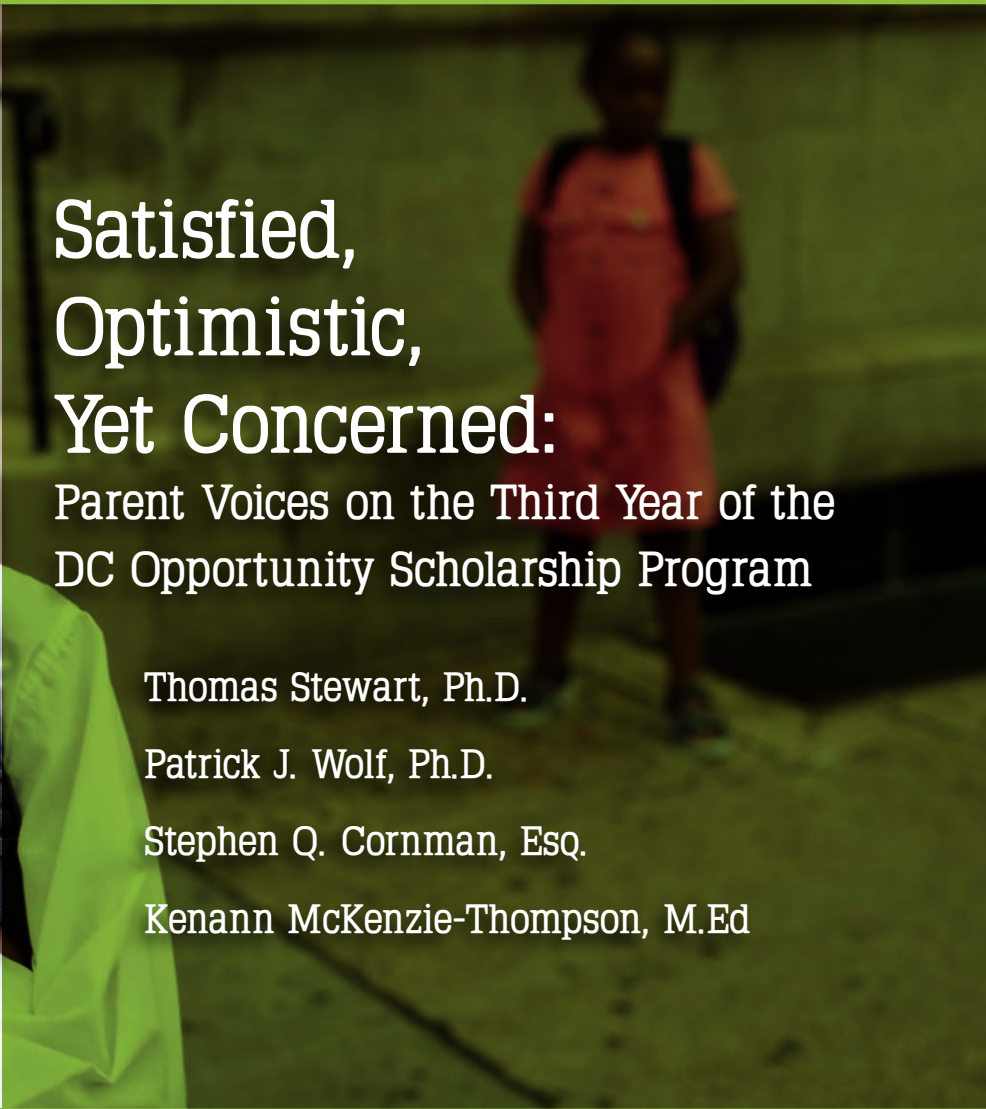
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DC Opportunity Scholarship Program

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## **GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY SCHOOL CHOICE DEMONSTRATION PROJECT**

The Georgetown University School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP), based within the Georgetown Public Policy Institute (GPPI), 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. The SCDP is also affiliated with the University of Arkansas, Department of Education Reform.

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. 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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The claims made and any remaining shortcomings in this report are the sole responsibility of the authors. We also wish to thank the staff of Washington Scholarship Fund for cooperating with the study.

Finally, we are extremely grateful for the voluntary participation of the Opportunity Scholarship Program families. Consistent with our promise to them, their names will remain confidential, yet their voices will be heard.



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# Executive Summary

On January 23, 2004, President Bush signed the DC School Choice Incentive Act into law.<sup>1</sup> This landmark piece of legislation included \$14 million in funding for what would become the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP). The OSP is the first federally-funded K-12 scholarship program in the country and was designed to provide approximately 1,700 children from low income families with tuition scholarships worth up to \$7,500. The scholarships cover the costs of attending nonpublic schools within the District of Columbia that agreed to participate in the Program. In December of 2006, Congress amended the DC School Choice Incentive Act to increase the continuing eligibility requirements from 200 percent of poverty line to 300 percent for families already enrolled in the Program.<sup>2</sup> As a pilot program, the OSP is authorized to operate for five years and is being implemented by the Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF).

In addition to extending educational choices to a group of economically disadvantage families in the District of Columbia, the OSP provides a unique opportunity to learn more about what happens when more families, particularly those who have been historically denied multiple school options, have the opportunity and responsibility to choose a private school for their child. The U.S. Department of Education, through the Institute for Education Sciences, is overseeing a rigorous quantitative experimental evaluation of the impact of the Program on a number of student outcomes, including student achievement.<sup>3</sup> Here, however, we provide information that represents a separate and independent qualitative assessment of how families are experiencing the Program.

This report continues a series that started two years ago. During the third year round of focus group discussions, which were held during the spring of 2007, parents and students were offered an opportunity to reflect upon their previous responses and explain why their views persist or have changed.<sup>4</sup> Like

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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 Tax Relief and Health Care Act of 2006, H.R. 6111 § 404. (2006).

3 Wolf, Patrick, Babette Gutmann, Michael Puma, Lou Rizzo, Nada 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, June 2007, NCEE 2007-4009; this and previous reports available at [www.ed.gov/ies/ncee](http://www.ed.gov/ies/ncee).

4 Please note that in the first two years of the study we hosted focus groups for students in middle and high school. Given the difficulty of engaging adolescent students in meaningful dialogue in front of their peers, we did not host a focus group for middle school students in year 3 and decided not to use any material from the high school focus group. Thus, the third year report focuses solely on the experiences of the adult members of the participating families.

the previous two reports on Parent and Student Voices of the OSP, the Third Year Report continues to expand our understanding of the families' experiences with their new schools and how they perceive that their children are being impacted by this program. In addition to gaining a deeper understanding of their evolving attitudes about and behaviors associated with school choice, this year we expanded our discussion with families in an attempt to understand how they measure student success; and how they are most likely to express their satisfaction (or the lack thereof) to policy-makers and other interested stakeholders as the pilot program approaches reauthorization.

Following are the most significant findings of the Third Year Report:

1. In retrospect, most families found the conversation with school based personnel to be the most reliable and helpful source of information about schools. Most parents felt the school directory, brochures and other forms of written information were less valuable compared to actual school visits and discussions with school staff when choosing a school.
2. The vast majority of Cohort 1 families have shifted their focus from an emphasis on school safety to matters concerning their children's academic development. These parents feel that their basic concerns about safety have been assuaged, and they can now turn their attention to monitoring their children's grades, test scores and other aspects of their academic development.
3. At this stage of their experiences with the OSP, most parents measure their children's progress almost exclusively by the level of enthusiasm the students express about school and their improved attitudes towards learning. Actual grades and test scores are secondary concerns. By this standard, the vast majority of families reported that their children are succeeding or progressing in very important ways.
4. Given a range of possibilities by which to express their views about their experiences with the OSP, an overwhelming number of parents reported that they preferred sharing their experiences directly with Congress and the City Council as the most viable means of expression because it provides them the most direct way of engaging key decision makers.
5. Parents were more vocal this year about the need for an independent entity to verify the information schools provide to parents about their programs and services, as well as monitor the schools during the academic year.
6. The vast majority of parents continue to express very strong interest in participating in the focus groups that are central to this study. In fact, many parents view participating in the focus groups as a form of civic responsibility. Equally as important, given their very limited interaction with other parents, many of them appreciate the opportunity to share and learn about the experiences of other families.



## Overview of Third Year Report

This report presents information about the experiences of families participating in the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) during its third year of operation. It seeks to augment statistical studies that focus on the impact of school choice by providing contextual detail that chronicles what participating families are experiencing as they take part in this first-ever federal school voucher program. Previously we reported on parent and student focus group responses regarding the initial implementation of the OSP.<sup>1</sup> This study extends that analysis of the lived experiences of two different cohorts of families participating in the OSP: Cohort 1, which joined the program in 2004; and Cohort 2, which enrolled in 2005.

The experiences of Cohort 1 families, three years into the program, and Cohort 2 families, after two years, shed new light on the impact of an education reform initiative that explicitly seeks to provide low income families residing in Washington, DC with additional school options. Specifically, we discovered that parents' consumer attitudes and behaviors are changing in some very noticeable ways. Compared to previous reports, parents are becoming increasingly more focused on the academic development of their children, which they often measure by their informal observations of their children's attitudes and behaviors versus more formal criteria like grades or test scores.

The previous reports, like much of the contemporary research and general public discourse about school choice, examined and described the experiences of participating families through a consumer behavior lens. We agree that this is a very useful way to discuss the families' experiences. However, based on this year's findings, it is clear that the OSP has done more than simply provide families with access to private schools. For most families participating in this study, it has forced them to move from a relatively passive role in their children's K-12 academic experiences to a more active role. Though playing a more active role is not new to some of them, the nature of the responsibilities and the increased expectations associated with the scholarship has placed new demands on most of them. Thus, the central purpose of this year's focus groups and Third Year Report is to better understand and explain the continued evolution of these school-choice families as well as the challenges they face.

## Research Methodology

This report offers a rare perspective on the self-reported evolution of the thinking and behavior of low income families participating in a publicly funded school voucher program. The primary goal of this ongoing study is to chronicle the lived experiences of families participating in the Program. Like Amy

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<sup>1</sup> Stewart, Thomas, Patrick J. Wolf, and Stephen Q. Cornman, "Parent and Student Voices on the First Year of the Opportunity Scholarship Program," *Peabody Journal of Education* 82 issue 2-3, 2007; Cornman, Stephen Q., Thomas Stewart, and Patrick J. Wolf, Elizabeth Rutzick, *The Evolution of School Choice Consumers: Parent and Student Voices on the Second Year of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program*, SCDP- 0701, May, 2007.

Stuart Wells, who conducted interviews with inner-city participants in a voluntary school busing program in St. Louis, we seek to “get past simplistic generalizations and make sense of the complex school choice processes from the perspective of the people making the decisions.”<sup>2</sup> After all, as we stated three years ago, if one wants to know why and how low income parents and students experience school choice, why not speak with them directly about the subject?

This qualitative study focuses on the experiences of 110 families, representing approximately 180 students who were awarded scholarships through the OSP. Sixty of these families began the program in its inaugural year (Cohort 1 or C-1) and the other fifty families began the Program in its second year (Cohort 2 or C-2).

A variety of approaches were used to recruit participants in each cohort. The C-1 families were selected as a stratified random sample from the total population of 400 C-1 families that initially volunteered to participate in the study based on a presentation by our research team at a program renewal meeting. The C-2 families were recruited for the study through a variety of presentations at smaller family meetings, orientations, as well as a mass mailing. A total of 92 C-2 families volunteered for the study and 60 families were randomly selected to participate in specific focus group sessions. Although all participants voluntarily self-selected into the research sample, the C-2 participants were somewhat more selective than the C-1 families who were drawn from a broader base of initial volunteers. Due to the self-selection inherent in a qualitative study such as this one, readers should be cautious in generalizing any descriptive findings presented here to the OSP as a whole or to non-OSP school voucher programs.

All participating family members were invited to focus group sessions, which were hosted in the spring of 2007 at the Georgetown University Law Center. Participating parents were provided with \$50 gift cards for their time and travel expenses, and students who participated in the sessions were given \$20 gift cards. Turnout varied within each segment but there was a minimum of seven parents within each focus group.<sup>3</sup> For C-2 the focus group for middle and high school students were held together.

In addition to grouping families by cohort, they were further segmented based on the grade levels of their OSP children and the parent’s primary language. For each of the two cohorts, four separate focus groups were hosted: (1st) parents of students in elementary school, (2nd) parents of students in middle school, (3rd) parents of students in high school. These families were grouped based on their common experiences by grade level and were all African American. In addition, given the rapid growth of the Spanish speaking

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2 Wells, Amy Stuart. “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: Teachers College Press, 1996), p. 31.

3 Please note that there were less than six participants for the C-2 middle and high school families. Thus, we consolidated these two segments into one focus group. All references to C-2 middle and high school families reflect the views of this combined group.

community in the District of Columbia, we created a fourth (4th) focus group of parents whose primary language is Spanish.

Each focus group was facilitated by at least one experienced moderator. Moderators also used white-paper flip charts at key points in the focus groups to survey participants regarding their opinions and choices and to remind them of their responses in previous years of the study. Within each segment, parents first were challenged to select and rank order the three most significant responses. They then were reminded by the moderator of the response of that same focus group to the same question during the first year of the study over two years ago. If the previous list of responses differed from the current responses, and they usually did, parents were asked to explain why their responses had changed.<sup>4</sup>

The sessions were recorded and transcribed. Research staff then analyzed the transcripts, first independently and then as two-person teams, with the goal of identifying salient and consistent themes within each segment. The entire research team met to discuss emerging themes following the team analysis. The report is predicated on the emerging themes identified by the entire research team.

The following core research questions guided the discussions with families and the subsequent data analysis in the Third Year Report:

- Q1. In retrospect, what are the most important characteristics families look for in choosing a school?
- Q2. In retrospect, what information proved to be most helpful in making a school selection?
- Q3. At this stage of their experiences with the OSP, how do parents measure student success?
- Q4. Given the pending discussion and debate about the reauthorization of the OSP, how will families communicate their views about the Program to policy-makers and other interested stakeholders?

The contrasts between Cohorts 1 and 2 families are instructive here, as C-1 participants exercised school choice in the context of a brand new program, while C-2 families entered a more mature and fully developed program. The scholarship program that C-2 families entered included more information sources, supports services, and less available slots in private schools than C-1 families experienced.

At the conceptual level, our analysis focused on the following questions:

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<sup>4</sup> Changes in the collective responses of the year 3 focus groups are unlikely to be merely due to changes in the composition of the panels over the years, as our own personal recollections and focus group registration sheets confirm that most of the focus group participants in the third year had also participated in years 1 and 2.

How have families developed or refined the way they think about and pursue school choice options as a result of participating in the OSP;

How do the families evaluate their school choice decisions, specifically focusing on what happens when the information they used to make their initial school choice did not provide the level or quality of insight they later realized they might have needed;

How might families use available information about their school options differently; and

How might families express their sentiments about the Program with policy-makers and other interested stakeholders as the pilot comes up for reauthorization?

## Data Analysis

From the first encounters with these families during the fall of 2004 to the most recent round of focus group discussions with them during the spring of 2007, we have concentrated on specific aspects of their experiences, namely: (1) the characteristics they were looking for in a new school; (2) what information they found most helpful; (3) what they look for when assessing whether their child is making progress (which we



call measures of success); (4) are they satisfied with the OSP; and, during our last meeting with them, (5) how they will express their views about the OSP with policy-makers and other interested stakeholders.

This year we used an approach to soliciting feedback from the participants that challenged them to reflect upon their past responses and interpret them in the light of their present experiences and understandings. We conclude each of the topic or thematic areas presented below with a discussion about what participants offered as explanations for the differences or changes in how they now rank order their responses to these important questions surrounding the exercise of school choice. Their explanations provide unique insights into how the OSP has transformed the way these families think about and engage their children and the schools they now attend.

This year we focus on comparing and contrasting the family responses to the same research questions from two distinct perspectives. The primary comparison is among parent responses to a certain question across the four grade and language segments. Secondary comparisons are made when responses differ consistently between the two cohorts within the grade and language segments.

## Parent Voices in the Third Year of the OSP

In this section we compare and contrast the focus group responses of Opportunity Scholarship families across four distinct family segments (Hispanic, elementary, middle and high school). We also compare and contrast the prior and current responses of Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 parents to various questions. Under each of the research questions, we provide a table that highlights the responses by family segments and cohorts.<sup>5</sup>

### Q1. In retrospect, what are the most important characteristics that families looked for in choosing a school?

Our first question to families during our third year of this qualitative study focused on what they seek in a school of choice. The research literature remains divided on this important question. Some analysts suggest that racial segregation and better sports teams motivate parental school choices.<sup>6</sup> Other researchers

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<sup>5</sup> Please note that the research team consolidated the previous (e.g. Year 1) responses from C-1 and C-2 as a point of reference. Thus, these responses appear in each table as “previous response.” Within each focus group, parents were given an opportunity to review a comprehensive list of responses and collectively rank order their responses. After they completed that exercise, we shared with them their previous responses and challenged them to explain the changes or persistence in their responses.

<sup>6</sup> Richard F. Elmore and Bruce Fuller, “Empirical Research on Educational Choice: What are the Implications for Policy-Makers?” in Bruce Fuller and Richard F. Elmore (eds.), *Who Chooses? Who Loses? Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice*. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996), p. 192; Edward B. Fiske and Helen F. Ladd, *When Schools Compete: A Cautionary Tale* (Washington: Brookings, 2000), pp. 195-198; Mark Schneider and Jack Buckley,



argue that lower-income inner-city families especially value safety and basic instruction.<sup>7</sup> Still other scholars claim that academic rigor and teacher quality dominate the decision-making of even highly disadvantaged school choosers.<sup>8</sup> Although our study cannot resolve this dispute entirely, it is interesting to ask what parents say they seek in schools of choice and whether their answers change over time.

## A. Hispanic families

Table 1. *Important Characteristics in Choosing a School for Hispanic Families*

<b>Q1. What characteristics are most important in choosing a school?</b>		
Past Responses Both Cohorts	Recent Responses Cohort 1	Recent Responses Cohort 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Safety</i></li> <li>2. <i>Class size</i></li> <li>3. <i>Location</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Rigorous curriculum</i></li> <li>2. <i>Religious orientation</i></li> <li>3. <i>Extra curricular activities</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Safety</i></li> <li>2. <i>Religious orientation</i></li> <li>3. <i>Location</i></li> </ol>

The Hispanic families across both cohorts were more likely than any other family segment to cite religion as a significant characteristic they were seeking in a new school. Many of these families believe religious values are essential to instilling discipline and “respect” into young people, as the following parent states:

*We like the values, we like to have the children respect God, we feel that that is very important, because when the children are not taught about God, they do not believe and lack guidance and structure, that’s very important.<sup>9</sup>*

The Hispanic families differ, however, with regard to safety. Cohort 1 families no longer consider safety to be an important issue. On the other hand, the majority of Cohort 2 families, who have been in the Program one year less than the Cohort 1 families, continue to list safety as their number one concern.

“What do Parents Want from Schools? Evidence from the Internet,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 24:2, (2002); Brian P. Gill, P. Michael Timpane, Karen E. Ross, and Dominic J. Brewer, *Rhetoric Versus Reality: What We Know and What We Need to Know About Vouchers and Charter Schools* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001), pp. 173-174.

7 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.

8 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, 2001), Table 3; Patrick Wolf, Babette Gutmann, Nada Eissa, Michael Puma, and Marsha Silverberg, *Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: First Year Report on Participation*, U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (Washington, D.C., 2005), p. C-7.

9 PSV Focus Groups, Hispanic Parents, Cohort 1, Spring 2007.

*I think security is still an issue. I also think that private and charter schools are really pushing to raise the children's academic standards, but more than this for me security and the environment is very important so that the children may learn. It's useless if a school has a great academic program, but there are shootings outside the school.<sup>10</sup>*

Another parent commented that:

*Another factor is the state of the child himself. The environment is very important, what is going on in the school, how many girls are pregnant.<sup>11</sup>*

## B. Elementary School Families

Table 2. Important Characteristics in Choosing a School for Elementary School Families

<b>Q1. What characteristics are most important in choosing a school?</b>		
Past Responses Both Cohorts	Recent Responses Cohort 1	Recent Responses Cohort 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Safety</i></li> <li>2. <i>Class size</i></li> <li>3. <i>Location</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Curriculum</i></li> <li>2. <i>Class size</i></li> <li>3. <i>Safety</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Class size</i></li> <li>2. <i>Academic rigor</i></li> <li>3. <i>Religious orientation</i></li> </ol>

Class size has emerged as a crucial characteristic parents look to when choosing a school characteristic for both cohorts. The majority of elementary school families are adamant that their children be in classrooms with smaller numbers of students and situations that provide their children with more individualized attention. In contrast to the first year of the program, safety is less of an issue for both cohorts. When asked to explain why safety is less of an issue, several parents noted that:

*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.<sup>12</sup>*

<sup>10</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Hispanic Parents, Cohort 2, Spring 2007.

<sup>11</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Hispanic Parents, Cohort 2, Spring 2007.

<sup>12</sup> PSV Focus Group, Elementary School Parent; Cohort 1, Spring 2007.

Another parent continued:

*No I understand.... I share the same view now that they're in school the way school is supposed to be.... Safety is always an issue; however, we feel more comfortable now and we can look at other things our kids need in order to achieve....<sup>13</sup>*

Like this respondent, several parents communicated complex opinions about school safety. Generally speaking, they are saying that safety is always a parental concern, but as they have become more confident that their child is safer now than before, they can focus more on other student needs.

## C. Middle School Families

Table 3. Important Characteristics in Choosing a School for Middle School Families

<b>Q1. What characteristics are most important in choosing a school?</b>		
Past Responses Both Cohorts	Recent Responses Cohort 1	Recent Responses Cohort 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Safety</i></li> <li>2. <i>Class size</i></li> <li>3. <i>Location</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Class size</i></li> <li>2. <i>Safety</i></li> <li>3. <i>Location</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Curriculum</i></li> <li>2. <i>Class size</i></li> <li>3. <i>Safety</i></li> </ol>

The most important characteristics cited by both middle school families from C-1 and C-2 include small class size and the curriculum. Although safety remains a concern for both middle school cohorts, it is not the dominant factor it was initially.

## D. High School Families

Table 4. Important Characteristics in Choosing a School for High School Families

<b>Q1. What characteristics are most important in choosing a school?</b>		
Past Responses Both Cohorts	Recent Responses Cohort 1	Recent Responses Cohort 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Safety</i></li> <li>2. <i>Class size</i></li> <li>3. <i>Location</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Curriculum</i></li> <li>2. <i>Class size</i></li> <li>3. <i>Safety</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Class size</i></li> <li>2. <i>Academic rigor</i></li> <li>3. <i>Religious orientation</i></li> </ol>

There is a significant difference between the way the high school families in C-1 and C-2 and the other grade segments view the most important characteristics in a new school.<sup>14</sup> Cohort 1 families, after three years

<sup>13</sup> PSV Focus Group, Elementary School Parents, Cohort 1, Spring 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Because roughly 90% of the high school families have children attending the same school, the responses may be

within the OSP, continue to view safety as one of the two most important characteristics of a new school. On the other hand, Cohort 2 high school families have shifted their concern from safety to the quality of the curriculum. These families are consciously aware of the fact that as their children continue to mature into young adulthood a quality high school education will significantly influence their children's life chances, yet many of them also recognize that safety is a nearly constant concern for the parents of adolescents in the inner city. As this parent notes:

*I don't have to worry about him being...hit by somebody else fighting or throwing kids....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.*<sup>15</sup>

## Summary

School choice researchers continue to debate which characteristics of schools are most valued by new school choosers especially in inner-city environments. The argument commonly centers on whether parents seek academic quality or merely a safe environment for their child. It may be that safety and academic rigor are both high priorities for new school choosers in urban settings. Which concern dominates their thinking may depend on (1) how long their child has been in a school of choice and (2) whether or not the child is in or entering high school.

Across several of our focus group segments we witnessed consistent patterns of change regarding parent reports of the school characteristics that are most important to them. While school safety had dominated their concerns during their first year in the Program, academic considerations such as class size, curriculum, and the overall rigor of the school's program are now emerging as top considerations for the first time or moving up in priority. Several parents explicitly stated that safety was less of a concern for them now that they have placed their child in a private school that they consider to be safe, a position consistent with the idea that inner-city students have a hierarchy of educational needs and more fundamental needs, such as safety, must be satisfied before the focus can be shifted to other needs, such as educational quality.<sup>16</sup> The one exception was parents of high school students, who apparently feel that they must be constantly vigilant regarding the safety of their adolescent children.

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grounded in the experiences of that high school alone.

<sup>15</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of High School Students, Cohort 1, Spring 2007

<sup>16</sup> The idea of such a hierarchy of human needs was famously put forth by Abraham Maslow in *Motivation and Personality*, 3rd Edition (New York: Harper Collins, 1987).

A second clear pattern across the sets of previous and current responses is the reduced importance of school location in the thinking of parents. Location was the third-most-important school characteristic for each of the focus group segments initially, but was only mentioned by a few of the focus group participants this year. This may mean that school location was a more important consideration when a parent initially chose a new school for their child than it will be once the child has settled into the new school and the family has developed a routine for transporting the child to and from the school.



## Q2. What type of information did the families find to be most helpful?

Our second question to families centered on the usefulness of school information from a variety of sources in helping them to select a school. Information about schools can be classified broadly as either written descriptive information or verbal observational information. Written descriptive information takes the form of school directories and brochures. Some analysts argue that such information is important for urban school choice programs, since it is broadly available to all families, regardless of their income or the extent of their social networks.<sup>17</sup> Verbal observational information is gained through school visits and discussions with school administrators, teachers, and other parents. Some researchers claim that parents are more trusting of verbal observational information about schools and will lean heavily upon such guidance when it is available.<sup>18</sup> Here we ask our focus group families to evaluate which sources of school information have been most helpful to them initially and later in their school choice experience.

### A. Hispanic Families

Table 5. Hispanic Families Found to be Useful

<b>Q2. What Information was most helpful?</b>		
Past Responses Both Cohorts	Recent Responses Cohort 1	Recent Responses Cohort 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>School visits</i></li> <li>2. <i>Meeting with teachers and administrators</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Visit school administrators</i></li> <li>2. <i>Talk to teachers</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Talk to staff</i></li> <li>2. <i>School visits</i></li> <li>3. <i>Talk to parents</i></li> </ol>

Both cohorts of Hispanic families have consistently placed a high value on school visits and conversations with school based personnel. Since the beginning of our evaluation of the OSP, Hispanic families have consistently placed a higher premium on conversations with school-based personnel than have other segments of OSP families. Even though much of the written school information associated with the OSP was available in Spanish, Hispanic parents still appear to trust their eyes and ears much more than what they read. In addition, Cohort 2 Hispanic families were the only family segment across both cohorts to cite conversations with other parents as an important source of information. This may be explained in part by

<sup>17</sup> See especially Jeffrey R. Henig, *Rethinking School Choice: Limits of the Market Metaphor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 210; Mark Schneider, Paul Teske, Christine Roche, and Melissa Marschall, "Networks to Nowhere: Segregation and Stratification in Networks of Information About Schools," *American Journal of Political Science* 41(4), 1997.

<sup>18</sup> 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. 47.

the relationships between Cohort 1 and 2 families. Prior to the OSP, Cohort 1 Hispanic families probably had very limited access to other families attending private schools. On the other hand, Cohort 2 Hispanic families had access to Cohort 1 Hispanic families and possibly relied on them to share insights about school options.

*On paper they can tell you that it's the best school in the world, but I think that visiting is important, for example, I went to visit the school while school was in session, so I could see the interaction between the teachers and students, the directors, so one gets a better feel about how the school operates, aside from reading it on paper. You can observe how the students behave or if the teachers are yelling at the students. Also while at the school you think about other issues, such as security and location.<sup>19</sup>*

*Well, when you first approach them you sort of feel bad, because you know space is very limited and, being a foreigner, its different, so it helps to talk with the directors and other parents, to discuss the program and student life. This helps you to feel not like an outsider. You know you are being given this scholarship in this school, so these conversations help bridge the cultural gap. You want to be part of the school. If they treat you bad, then you know.<sup>20</sup>*

## B. Elementary School Families

Table 6. Information Elementary School Families Found to be Helpful

<b>Q2. What Information was most helpful?</b>		
Past Responses Both Cohorts	Recent Responses Cohort 1	Recent Responses Cohort 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>School visits</i></li> <li>2. <i>Meeting with teachers and administrators</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>School visits</i></li> <li>2. <i>Talk to teachers</i></li> <li>3. <i>Test scores</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>School visits</i></li> <li>2. <i>Directory</i></li> <li>3. <i>Talk to parents and administrators</i></li> </ol>

The elementary school families provide the deepest insight into the school selection process in part because of the relatively large number of private elementary schools that agreed to participate in the OSP. Unlike the middle and high school families, they had a wide and disparate set of schools to choose from, which

<sup>19</sup> PSV Focus Group, Parents of Hispanic Students, Spring 2007.

<sup>20</sup> PSV Focus Group, Parents of Hispanic Students, Spring 2007.

challenged them to approach the school selection process differently than their counterparts with middle and high school age children.

The majority of C-1 and C-2 elementary school families thought that school visits were the most reliable sources of information about new schools. However, several parents felt their initial positive impression of a school was not confirmed by their subsequent experiences:

*They always seemed like they're [some 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.<sup>21</sup>*

In contrast to the other family segments, with the exception of C-1 middle school families, Cohort 2 elementary school families continue to place a high premium on the school directory developed by WSF. Many elementary school parents supported the following view:

*I think that the school directory that the [WSF] gives is really important. At least that's like a lead. It tells you a lot about the school. Each page tells a whole lot.... I like to meet the teachers in person too but once I've picked the school. I think it's important enough that you can choose from that book without going from school to school.<sup>22</sup>*

Given the large number of schools they have to choose from, the majority of parents of elementary school students appreciated the general information about schools that allows them to reduce their list of possibilities down to a smaller number of actual schools to visit.

## C. Middle School Families

Table 7. Information Parents of Middle School Families Found to be Helpful

<b>Q2. What Information was most helpful?</b>		
Past Responses Both Cohorts	Recent Responses Cohort 1	Recent Responses Cohort 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Directory</li> <li>2. School Visits</li> <li>3. Meeting with teachers and administrators</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. WSF staff</li> <li>2. Directory</li> <li>3. School fair</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. School visits</li> <li>2. Talking to principals</li> <li>3. Talk to parents</li> </ol>

<sup>21</sup> PSV Focus Group, Parents of Elementary School Students, Spring 2007.

<sup>22</sup> PSV Focus Group, Elementary school parents, C-1, Spring 2007.



Both cohorts of parents of middle school students initially rated the school directory as the most helpful source of school information. Over time, C-1 parents downgraded the directory to second place, saying that the staff of the WSF now is their most prized school information resource. C-2 parents no longer mention the school directory as a top information source. The middle school parents in C-2 now list first-hand experiences -- with schools, principals, and other parents -- as the most helpful sources of school information.

## D. High School families

Table 8. Information Parents of High School Families Found to be Helpful

<b>Q2. What Information was most helpful?</b>		
Past Responses Both Cohorts	Recent Responses Cohort 1	Recent Responses Cohort 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>School visits</i></li> <li>2. <i>Meeting with teachers and administrators</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Talking to principals</i></li> <li>2. <i>Brochures</i></li> <li>3. <i>Test scores</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>School visits</i></li> <li>2. <i>Talking to principals</i></li> <li>3. <i>Talking to parents</i></li> </ol>

There are no distinct differences or changes between the high school families on the types of information they found most valuable. In both cohorts, the high school families felt that school visits, specifically conversations with school based personnel, were most important. 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, which allowed them to devote more time and energy into investigating in person the one large high school participating in the program.

One high school parent explained how the school directory was helpful initially, but personal experiences quickly supplanted it as a source of school information:

*I still think it's very helpful in terms of an idea of what schools to select cause I didn't really have an idea of what schools accepted the scholarship fund but when you put your kid in the school and you're actually going then you really find out what's going on. Until then you don't actually know what's going on in the schools. And the schools are misrepresenting themselves to tell you the truth.<sup>23</sup>*

Another high school parent emphasized the importance of constant communication between home and school when discussing school information sources.

<sup>23</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of High School Students (C-1), Spring 2007.

*I think it's good to communicate with the teachers. They're with the child so it's good to talk to them you know exactly what's going on. I feel like it's important if you keep the lines of communication open.... As long as I'm communicating with my kid's teachers it won't be like in June he fails and I'm like what happened. If I stay on point, my child will stay on point. If he sees I care, he'll care cause he knows that teacher will call me if he's not doing right when he's failing or whatever.<sup>24</sup>*

## Summary

Generally speaking, OSP families appear to value more substantive and evaluative information versus descriptive information about schools. It appears that “seeing is believing” for them. This finding is consistent with the results of Paul Teske’s general survey of school choosers in Washington, DC, where 72 percent of respondents listed school administrators, teachers, family, or friends as the single most important source of information in guiding their school choice. Teske concludes, “Clearly, verbal information seems to be the most important mechanism for parents to gather information, combined with visiting schools and seeing them first-hand.”<sup>25</sup>

Although some segments of our focus group participants – most notably the middle school parents – initially considered the school directory to be a very important information source, all parental groups now list school visits and direct communications with administrators, teachers, and other parents as the most valuable sources of information about schools. Summary descriptive information such as directories and brochures may be especially important to new school choosers with modest incomes who have less access to school information through their existing networks of family and friends. Once they gain some experience with school choice; however, parents appear to be committed to gathering school information first-hand, through personal experience, communications with school personnel, and informal parent networks.

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24 PSV Focus Groups, Parents of High School Students (C-1), Spring 2007.

25 Paul Teske, “School Choosers in the District of Columbia,” Paper presented at the conference *School Choice in the Nation’s Capital*, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, July 19, 2007, p. 15.

### Q3. What are the measures of student success for OSP families?

Parents, scholars, and policymakers are all interested in whether or not school choice programs tend to be successful. But how do we define “success” in this context? In the public administration field in particular, measures of success tend to be classified broadly as inputs, outputs, intermediate outcomes, and end outcomes.<sup>26</sup> 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 are the decisions and actions of organizational personnel, such as the disciplinary code for the school and the quality of the instruction delivered inside the classroom. Intermediate outcomes are the results of the decisions and actions of personnel that are desired but are not the ultimate goal of the organization. They are conditions that serve as a precursor to final goal achievement. In the case of schools, they would 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.

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26 See especially Harry P. Hatry, *Performance Measurement: Getting Results*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 2006).



Analysts generally view measures of end outcomes as the preferred indicators for evaluating the success of organizations. When measures of end outcomes are not appropriate or available, intermediate outcomes are preferred to outputs or inputs as rubrics of success. Here we present the perspectives of parents on the question of how to measure school success.

## A. Hispanic Parents

Table 9. Measures of Success for Hispanic Parents

<b>Q3. What are the measures of success?</b>		
Past Responses Both Cohorts	Recent Responses Cohort 1	Recent Responses Cohort 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Rigorous curriculum</i></li> <li>2. <i>Safety</i></li> <li>3. <i>Increased interest in school</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Academic progress</i></li> <li>2. <i>Behavior in and out of school</i></li> <li>3. <i>Improved attitude towards learning</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Mastery of English</i></li> <li>2. <i>Desire to attend college</i></li> <li>3. <i>Improved learning</i></li> </ol>

Initially, the Hispanic parents in both OSP cohorts focused on an educational input and intermediate outcomes as indicators of success. The presence of a rigorous curriculum, safety, and student interest are desirable pre-conditions for the future generation of positive student end outcomes; however, they typically are not viewed as the ultimate goals of education. These parents may have been signaling their expectation that it might take a while for the school change made possible by the OSP to result in actual improvements in student learning. In the meantime, the parents described a willingness to accept positive school conditions and student attitudes as likely harbingers of more tangible future academic success.

Both cohorts of Hispanic parents have been adamant about the importance of their children being actively engaged in learning challenging material. They appear to draw encouragement from their children's willingness and enthusiasm to take on educational challenges.

*If there's a weekend where they grab their books without me having to bug them, that's great, they need to enjoy learning, because once they reach the university level, if they don't have this drive, they will fail.<sup>27</sup>*

*This [student interest in school] is very important because I have seen it in my own kids. Now I am studying to become a citizen and I go to a class on Saturdays, and when I come home they want me to explain to them what it is that we have learned. We are all learning at the same time because they love history. Even though that's not school*

<sup>27</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of Hispanic Students Focus Groups, Cohort 1, Spring 2007.

*related, I see them on weekends very happy. They even argue amongst themselves as to which one will ask me about my books first. The kids also learn and [are] teaching me. We are all learning at the same time. If they weren't interested they would not get this involved.<sup>28</sup>*

Two and three years into their experience of the OSP, Hispanic parents are now evaluating the success of the Program more in terms of tangible end outcomes for their children. They now list such important results as student academic progress, mastery of English, and behavior inside and outside of class as indicators of whether or not the Program is working for their child. This pattern of responses suggests that Hispanic parents initially feel satisfied so long as the school choice opportunity has landed their children in a safe and educationally challenging environment. Later, they seek concrete measures of educational and behavioral improvements as rubrics for programmatic success.

## B. Elementary School Parents

Table 10. Measures of Success for Elementary School Parents

<b>Q3. What are the measures of success?</b>		
Past Responses Both Cohorts	Recent Responses Cohort 1	Recent Responses Cohort 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Rigorous curriculum</i></li> <li>2. <i>Safety</i></li> <li>3. <i>Increased interest in school</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Greater self esteem</i></li> <li>2. <i>Increased motivation</i></li> <li>3. <i>More encouraged</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Excelling at grade level</i></li> <li>2. <i>Being challenged</i></li> <li>3. <i>Enthusiasm</i></li> </ol>

There is considerable consistency across both sets of elementary school families about how they measure student success. Both cohorts appear to focus on the level of motivation and enthusiasm their children express, as well as what they have witnessed compared to their previous school experiences. Several parents stated during the focus groups:

*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 that he is engaged all the time in school, in classes, and homework and then learns what he has to learn in each class. So that's what I measure.<sup>29</sup>*

<sup>28</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of Hispanic Students Focus Groups, Cohort 1, Spring 2007.

<sup>29</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of Elementary School Students, Cohort 1, 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.<sup>30</sup>*

In contrast to the experience of the Hispanic parents, the non-Hispanic elementary school parents provided little indication that their measures of success had changed from outputs and intermediate outcomes, initially, to end outcomes later on. Cohort 2 parents did list “excelling at grade level” – an end outcome -- as their new measure of success after two years in the Program. The other indicators that both cohorts of parents described several years into the Program focus on student attitudes, such as enthusiasm, feelings and self-esteem. This continued focus on educational conditions and positive student attitudes may be due to the fact that their children are still in the early years of their formal education. More concrete educational outcomes may be expected as their students age or mature. A lack of trustworthy data may explain this observation as well. Parents can easily discern whether their children are “enthusiastic,” but they might not have the direct evidence necessary to assess whether they are acquiring content knowledge.

### C. Middle School Parents

Table 11. Measures of Success for Middle School Parents

<b>Q3. What are the measures of success?</b>		
Past Responses Both Cohorts	Recent Responses Cohort 1	Recent Responses Cohort 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Safety</i></li> <li>2. <i>Increased enthusiasm</i></li> <li>3. <i>Challenging and rewarding environment</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Educational growth</i></li> <li>2. <i>Fairness in school</i></li> <li>3. <i>Increased motivation</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Desire to continue their education</i></li> <li>2. <i>Becoming more independent</i></li> <li>3. <i>Learning on grade level</i></li> </ol>

Like parents in the other segments, middle school families do not rely much on formal academic criteria like grades and test scores to measure their children's success. In most cases, these families are looking for noticeable changes in student attitudes, motivation, etc. This focus on educational outputs and intermediate outcomes such as student attitudes has changed slightly since the first year of our study, as Cohort 1 parents now list “educational growth” as their top indicator of success and Cohort 2 parents now list “learning on grade level” as among their top three success indicators. Still, student attitudes and experiences remain the primary means by which middle school parents are evaluating Program success.

*My youngest, her reading skills had went up tremendously. Before she got to Catholic school, she was the type of child who didn't socialize a lot. She was quiet, didn't*

<sup>30</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of Elementary School Students, Cohort 1, Spring 2007.

*participate when it came to teacher asking, "Raise your hand." But now since she attended Catholic school, she participates, she raises her hand, she reads a lot.<sup>31</sup>*

## D. High School Families

Table 12. Measures of Success for High School Parents

<b>Q3. What are the measures of success?</b>		
Past Responses Both Cohorts	Recent Responses Cohort 1	Recent Responses Cohort 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Rigorous curriculum</i></li> <li>2. <i>Safety</i></li> <li>3. <i>Increased student interest in school</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Enjoys school</i></li> <li>2. <i>Better grades</i></li> <li>3. <i>Better attitude</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Desire to continue their education</i></li> <li>2. <i>Becoming more independent</i></li> <li>3. <i>Learning on grade level</i></li> </ol>

Since the beginning of the study, Cohort 1 high school families have 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. High school families in general and Cohort 1 high school families in particular view "safety" as the number one characteristic they looked for in a new school. It appears that safety is a proxy for the conditions necessary for learning. These families felt that those conditions did not exist in the schools their children previously attended.

Like the Hispanic parents, the parents of high school students revealed a change in how they evaluated student success in the OSP from the start to the present mid-point of this pilot program. As did parents in the other focus groups, the high school parents initially emphasized positive school conditions and student attitudes exclusively as their indicators of success. As their children approach high school graduation, parents are quite naturally more focused on end outcomes such as student grades, learning levels, and preparation for higher education as rubrics of Program success for their child.

In addition, as the following parent describes, some high school parents feel that their children must be responsible for breaking a cycle of low expectations that otherwise limits their opportunities:

*I don't really think they understand what's happening because if you live it and you continue to live it a lot of times you don't know no better.... I can speak on it because I was in somewhat the same situation. My mom didn't finish high school and I was an honor roll student. No one prepared me, no one even talked to me about college. It was just, 'Oh [parent name] graduated from high school, yeah.' I never really had the college thought in my mind and now I'm 37 years old and I'm a college student when I could*

<sup>31</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of Middle School Students, Cohort 1, Spring 2007.

*have gotten it... over with. If someone could have prepared it for me... in the 10<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> grade...I would have done it because it would have been spoken into my existence... I had kids and never went to college... Now I'm back in school raising kids, helping them with work when it didn't have to be that challenging. I don't want my kids to experience the same thing so I'm already speaking to them – you can be whatever you want to be... – you don't have to just get one degree – you can get how many degrees you want...<sup>32</sup>*

## Summary

An interesting finding from this section of our focus group discussions with parents was the different path they took from an initial focus on educational inputs, outputs, and intermediate outcomes such as student attitudes to a greater emphasis on concrete end outcomes as measures of programmatic success. The Hispanic and non-Hispanic high school parents in our study demonstrated the clearest transition from initially being satisfied with general educational conditions to currently being focused on tangible and important educational outcomes. Clearly, there is an urgent desire that their children master English, in the case of the Hispanic parents, and graduate high school with the grades and achievements necessary to continue their education, in the case of the non-Hispanic parents of high school students. These two groups are more anxious than other parents and can ill-afford to wait for desirable school conditions and student attitudes to manifest themselves at the immediate expense of concrete educational results. For them, the time appears to be now.

Student test score gains were the proverbial “dog that didn’t bark” in this segment of our study. Although several of the parent focus groups cited “academic progress” and “learning at grade level” as key measures of success two or three years into their OSP experience, they did not specifically mention standardized test scores as the indicator of such educational advancement. This finding contrasts starkly with the fact that most evaluations of school choice programs as well as the federal No Child Left Behind Act focus predominantly, if not exclusively, on test score gains as the measure of student success.<sup>33</sup> The responses most parents offered in the focus group discussions suggest that OSP parents are defining and evaluating the success of their school choice experience in vastly different ways than most researchers and policymakers would.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of Middle and High School Students, Cohort 2, Spring 2007.

<sup>33</sup> See for example Brian P. Gill, P. Michael Timpane, Karen E. Ross, and Dominic J. Brewer, *Rhetoric Versus Reality: What We Know and What We Need to Know About Vouchers and Charter Schools* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001), Chapter 3; Frederick M. Hess and Chester E. Finn, Jr. (Editors), *Leaving No Child Behind? Options for Kids in Failing Schools* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> It would be very valuable to explore the deeper meaning behind why parents seem to shy away from test score and other data. This is one of several topics we may explore in greater detail during our next engagement with the families.



## Q4. How will participating families express their views about the OSP with policy-makers and other interested stakeholders?

The final question we asked our focus group parents in the third year of our study was whether they were interested in sharing their experiences outside of the context of our study and, if so, how? Specifically, we sought information regarding a level of commitment parents might have in participating in advocacy efforts aimed at reauthorizing the legislation that established the pilot program. We acknowledge that such a question is likely to elicit positive responses, as social norms hold that people should be willing to volunteer in support of programs, especially if the programs benefit them. Readers should not draw strong conclusions from the high level of parental willingness to act in support of the OSP. However, responses to the question of how parents would prefer to be involved are less likely to be subject to a normative bias and could be highly revealing.



## A. Hispanic Parents

Table 13. *Expression of Views on the OSP by Hispanic Families*

<b>Q4. How can you best express your views about the OSP with policy-makers and other interested stakeholders?</b>	
Cohort 1	Cohort 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Testifying before Congress or the city council</li> <li>2. Letter writing</li> <li>3. Forming a support group/parent organization</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Letter writing</li> <li>2. Form parent organization</li> <li>3. Vote/protest</li> </ol>

Consistent with the families in the other three segments, Hispanic families are most willing to express their support for the Program via direct interaction with policy-makers. Unlike any other segment, however, they are more willing to engage in protests and make their vote contingent on support of the OSP. The following quotes represent the general views of these families.

*Well, if they ask for more parental input, especially at meetings or field trips, well I would do it. I am very happy with this program. Some parents would like to participate more, but due to other obligations, also if needed we could provide other types of support, if we need to gather signatures or talk to the politicians.<sup>35</sup>*

*If we need to gather somewhere or demonstrate to show our support for the program, we could also send letters, or perhaps organize a group.<sup>36</sup>*

## B. Elementary School Parents

Table 14. *Views on the OSP by Elementary School Families*

<b>Q4. How can you best express your views about the OSP with policy-makers and other interested stakeholders?</b>	
Cohort 1	Cohort 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Testifying before congress or the city council</li> <li>2. Lobby</li> <li>3. Join parent organization</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Attending meetings</li> <li>2. Lobby</li> <li>3. Organizing parents</li> </ol>

<sup>35</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of Hispanic Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2007.

<sup>36</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of Hispanic Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2007.

The elementary school parents were very receptive to expressing their views on the OSP to policy makers. Over the course of this three-year study, a core group of parents have consistently attended the focus groups in C-1. The parents in this core group appeared to experience a natural transformation in their concerns about the OSP, from school selection issues towards advocating for the 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 C-1 were particularly enthusiastic about influencing OSP policy. Many parents stated that they would engage in lobbying efforts.

*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.<sup>37</sup>*

*I do understand why they want to put [funds] back into the public schools but we're going to have to lobby. I agree we're going to have to do it.<sup>38</sup>*

*Obviously if we can lobby for this then obviously we can demand that public schools are better and eliminate the necessity for programs like this. I think at the outset this program is probably designed to be a bridge and not a cradle to the grave to get your children through high school. I think the focus has to be on the parents doing whatever the hell we have to do to get our kids the best opportunity to be successful...<sup>39</sup>*

Other families preferred to tell their story and educate policy makers on the attributes of the OSP.

*Well a great start would be letting them know some success stories, letting them talk with parents, and letting them talk to the schools too. 'Cause I'm going to be honest with you, when this first started the independent schools weren't opening their doors.<sup>40</sup>*

Elementary school families are the most likely segment of families to form and become members of a parent organization. Both cohorts listed parent organizations as a viable means to express their sentiments about the OSP to policy makers. Their willingness to form and become members of parent organizations may suggest that families that are relatively new to the education process have less negative experiences with groups and organizations, and therefore are more open to this possibility. However, elementary

<sup>37</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parent of Elementary School Students, Cohort 1, Spring 2007.

<sup>38</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parent of Elementary School Students, Cohort 1, Spring 2007.

<sup>39</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parent of Elementary School Students, Cohort 1, Spring 2007.

<sup>40</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parent of Elementary School Students, Cohort 1, Spring 2007.

parents are more involved (on average) than parents of secondary-school kids. The high level of parental involvement expressed by parents of elementary school students is a result of many factors, including ample opportunities to participate provided by the elementary schools, the sense that the younger children need more attention from their parents, and older students seeking to be independent from their parents.

A few parents indicated that they were involved in fundraising efforts of parent organizations.

*I've gone out and gotten businesses and organizations to donate to the school for the endowment because that money goes toward financial aid and helping any parent that needs it.<sup>41</sup>*

For some parents, time constraints remain a challenge to parental involvement in organized groups, as reflected by this statement:

*But I'm going to be honest, a lot of parents, once you finish picking your child up and going to a lot of the parent organizations and working in the schools I have not been able to have had time to work with the WSF parent organizations and then a lot of them I've seen when I talk to other people, you don't find out about them as often.<sup>42</sup>*

### C. Middle School Parents

Table 15. Views on the OSP by Middle School Parents

<b>Q4. How can you best express your views about the OSP with policy-makers and other interested stakeholders?</b>	
Cohort 1	Cohort 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Testify before Congress or City Council</li> <li>2. Letter writing</li> <li>3. Forming a support/parent organization</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Letter writing</li> <li>2. Form parent organization</li> <li>3. Vote/protest</li> </ol>

The parents of middle school students preferred to write letters and testify before Congress or the City Council, rather than engage in full scale lobbying efforts to express their views on the OSP. The parents of middle school student in both cohorts believe that the formation of parent organizations is an effective way to communicate their sentiments about the OSP. Some of them noted that an important OSP organization – the WSF – has been responsive to their voices.

<sup>41</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of Elementary School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2007.

<sup>42</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of Elementary School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2007.

*See, a lot of things we talk about have been taken care of, like those uniforms. They upped the money for the uniforms. I think it's like 100 or 150 dollars. So this is working right here and this is it for us.<sup>43</sup>*

## D. High School Parents

Table 16. Views on the OSP by High School Parents

<b>Q4. How can you best express your views about the OSP with policy-makers and other interested stakeholders?</b>	
Cohort 1	Cohort 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Inform others</i></li> <li>2. <i>Speak out in public</i></li> <li>3. <i>Testify before Congress or City Council</i></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Lobby</i></li> <li>2. <i>Share success stories</i></li> <li>3. <i>Vote/protest</i></li> </ol>

<sup>43</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of Middle School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2007



Like most families participating in the study, high school families are most willing to share their stories about and experiences with OSP with policy-makers and other interested stakeholders. These families, more so than any other segment, are least likely to express their views by voting. As noted earlier, these families are very interested in solutions that can have an immediate impact on their children's development, and they appear most interested in engaging policy-makers in a manner such that their voices can be heard sooner than later.

## Summary

As we have reported in previous focus group studies, the parents who are sharing with us their perspectives on their experiences with the OSP are enthusiastic about the Program. Most of them say they would be willing to share their stories publicly if called on to do so. Many also say that they would be willing to write letters to policy-makers in support of the Program. They appear to be much less interested in joining formal organizations associated with advocacy activities in support of the Program. It may be that these parents are not natural "joiners", have limited experiences with formal organizations, or simply lack the time to commit to anything more than a single act of support.<sup>44</sup> At this point two or three years into their school choice experience, parents say that they appreciate 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.

## V. Other Salient Observations

In this section, we provide a general overview of other salient observations that were made during the focus groups, as well as additional findings that emerged from the qualitative data analysis. More specifically, we will highlight parent satisfaction with the Program in general and areas that raised concern for parents. These additional observations fell outside of the scope of the four sets of questions we presented to parents in the focus groups but were nonetheless deemed pertinent to our analysis and for presenting a well rounded documentation of the responses obtained during our inquiry.

Consistent with previous Parent and Student Voices reports on the general topic of parent satisfaction, the vast majority of parents continue to express high levels of satisfaction with the Program, in general, and the program administrator – the Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF), in particular. However, parents remain modestly concerned about a few issues that were documented in previous reports, and they were more vocal about the need for further program changes.

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<sup>44</sup> These results are consistent with the general findings in Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2001).

## A. Family Satisfaction With the Program

With regard to the WSF, the majority of the parents remain very pleased with the way the Program is being managed. These parents believe their feedback and, in some cases, “complaints” have been heard and addressed adequately. Most of them feel that the WSF was directly responsible for bringing about the changes they have noticed in the Program, particularly in the areas of clear and concise financial policies and procedures, improved communication with teachers and administrators. The majority of parents also expressed satisfaction the increase in the income cap for families already enrolled in the program.

Following is one comment that seemed to symbolize the general feelings of satisfaction most parents expressed:

*All my expectations were met. The only expectations I actually had were for her to be in a more focused group, smaller class sizes, and things of that nature. All my expectations were met as far as that's concerned.*<sup>45</sup>

In other cases, parents only obtained a high level of satisfaction with their child's school after changing their initial school of choice. As one parent described:

*My son switched to a different OSP school this year and) I think they're more hands on, smaller class size, teacher that is you know more stronger, not scared, and she just understands my child you know she's personalizing him...Last year I really didn't feel like he learned but this year I can really see the difference in my son's school.*<sup>46</sup>

This comment suggests that for some parents' satisfaction stems from having additional school options if the initial choice does not pan out.

The parents of students with disabilities represent a special group of OSP participants. About one out of seven parents in Cohort 1 reported that their child had a learning or physical disability when they applied to the Program.<sup>47</sup> Students with disabilities were less likely than their peers without disabilities to use an Opportunity Scholarship if offered one.<sup>48</sup> Through discussions with school officials and parents, it is clear that most private schools participating in the Program accept OSP students with mild-to-moderate

<sup>45</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of Middle School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2007.

<sup>46</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of High School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2007.

<sup>47</sup> Wolf et al, *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, p. 45.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

disabilities and generally seek to mainstream them into their regular school environment with some individualized supports. One parent in our focus groups described her satisfaction with that approach.

*One thing I like that is positive about (my son's) school is (he) is a slow learner but the main thing I like is the teachers don't put him in a setting by himself. They make sure that he gets what he needs. They call and say (name of child) needs tutoring in math or whatever. They don't just pass him over like other schools...and that's the most positive thing. The fact that he gets everything he needs there and if you know he doesn't perk up or whatever she's constantly calling, sending home XYZ for (name of child) to finish up.<sup>49</sup>*

For the third year in a row, the majority of parents expressed general satisfaction with the OSP. Still, some concerns remained.

## B. Areas of Concern

This year parents were more vocal about the need for an independent entity to verify the information participating schools provide to parents, as well as to monitor the activities of the schools during the academic year. With hindsight as their frame of reference, most parents appear to have a more definitive sense of the strengths and limitations of the information about the schools that was at their disposal in the first two years of the Program. As a result, some of them now believe that a small number of schools misrepresented various aspects of their programs, a sentiment that was reflected in several parent quotes on school information in Section I. The increased parent interest in this topic also may be influenced by the fact that many of them have children who will be rising to middle or high school.

A significant number of parents expressed the need for an evaluation of the schools in the Program. In particular, the parents of elementary school students in C-1 focused on the evaluation of school quality. A few parents called for an independent entity to evaluate the learning environment and curriculum of the elementary schools.

Another area of concern that parents gave voice to was the availability of slots at the higher grade levels for their children as time goes on. Only 22 percent of the schools participating in the OSP serve students in the high school grades.<sup>50</sup> Most of those high schools only have a modest number of slots available to OSP students. Unless more private high schools join the Program or the existing set enrolls more OSP students, it will be difficult for participants to continue in the Program through to high school graduation. The problem has already become a serious issue for Cohort 1 students, as 62 percent of them are forecasted

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49 PSV Focus Groups, Parents of High School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2007.

50 Wolf et al. *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After One Year*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute for Education Sciences. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007, p. 17.



to be in grade 7 or higher and 44 percent in grade 9 or higher this year.<sup>51</sup> The following dialogue between focus group parents and the moderator illustrates parental concerns about the dearth of seats at the higher grade levels and how this may influence their child's participation in the Program:

*Parent 1: 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?*

*Parent 2: Exactly.*

*Parent 1: [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.*

*Moderator: This appears to be a very important issue. Has anybody else encountered a problem with the availability of slots?*

*Parent 2: I had the same problem with [child's school]... on the scholarship. The first school closed up. The second school they didn't have the space for him, and now this school right here they have the space and everything but he's not adapting to this school because the school is on a higher level than he's on.<sup>52</sup>*

It is clear that the issue of available slots at the high school level will cause some parents to be not only concerned, but also more likely to leave the Program. Following is an example of how the lack of seats at advanced grade levels also creates more demands on the parents to maneuver through the process:

*You might have noticed I didn't raise my hand to say if my daughter was going to be in the Program next year and that's only because I'm in the same situation sort of he's in. Because she's getting ready to graduate from (child's school) and go to the 7th grade. In independent schools you have a certain time slot to do everything... I don't know between the scholarship processing her forms and being in this school I don't know*

<sup>51</sup> Authors' calculations based on Wolf et al, *Evaluation of the Opportunity Scholarship Program: First Year Report on Participation...*, p. C-2.

<sup>52</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of Elementary School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2007.

*if she's going to be picked up by another school, so I don't know if she's going to be in there.<sup>53</sup>*

The satisfaction of many parents with the OSP is being tempered by their concerns that their child might not be able to secure a high school slot necessary to continue in the Program.

Aside from the need for a “school monitor” and rising concerns about available slots, the parents in general did not raise any other major issues with the Program. However, there were individual parents who raised particular concerns that we feel compelled to mention here.

Our first Parent and Student Voices Report documented that student stigmatization by school staff was a concern for many parents before they enrolled their children in their schools of choice. At the end of the first year, parents noted a modest degree of stigmatization that ranged from their feelings of discomfort at home-school meetings to teachers “calling out” their child as a scholarship student. Parents rarely broached the topic of stigmatization in the second year, and this year we only observed a few isolated cases of what can be generally described as a religious stigma or bias:

*I really think they have a double standard there... in terms of whether you are a member of their church and you're a scholarship child.... They made it a difference between you if you were receiving the scholarship. That shouldn't be anything you're just another kid going to school what difference does it make that you are on the scholarship?<sup>54</sup>*

In a separate focus group, another parent expressed feeling pressure because of her religious affiliation with the school.

*I had this one lady keep calling me like every night after school about me and my child coming to Thursday meeting to become Catholic. I don't want to be Catholic. I want her to be in a Catholic school, but I don't want her to be Catholic. So I think it's because these kids are not Catholic, they don't have these kids' best interest at heart. They looking at these, they looking down on these kids, I'm telling you.<sup>55</sup>*

As mentioned earlier, although these appear to be infrequent and isolated events, they are serious concerns from the perspective of some of the families and deserve to be reported.

<sup>53</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of Elementary School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2007.

<sup>54</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of High School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2007.

<sup>55</sup> PSV Focus Groups, Parents of Middle and High School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2007.



## Summary

Virtually every parental school choice initiative to date has reported very high levels of parental satisfaction with their new schools, especially in the initial year of their experiences with choice. Satisfaction with the new schools may be higher initially either because the dissatisfaction with their previous schools is freshest in the minds of the parents or because the parents have not gathered enough direct information about the new schools to truly answer substantive questions about their satisfaction. Three years into the OSP, we continue to discern high levels of satisfaction with the Program and OSP schools among parents participating in our focus group study.

Parental concerns about the program are generally focused on issues that could or do limit their ability to be effective in their evolving roles as school choice consumers and advocates for their children. Compared to last year when the parents' dominant concerns were that positive economic gains or developments in their lives that might disqualify them from the Program, this year the parents were mostly concerned about an inadequate number of school opportunities within OSP, particularly at the high school grades. With large numbers of OSP students rising towards the middle and high school grades, the availability and distribution of school slots and information about schools is perhaps more important now than ever before for many families.

These programmatic concerns of parents could, if not addressed in a timely manner, limit the length and quality of some families' participation in the OSP. Thus, our current read on Parent Voices regarding the Opportunity Scholarship Program is a general satisfaction with the Program; optimism about the extension of the Program, and concern about their future participation.

## Appendix A Protocols for Third Year Focus Groups

### PARENT FOCUS GROUP MODERATOR'S GUIDE

Saturday, February 24, 2007

#### I. Greetings (10 minutes)

Good afternoon. My name is xxx. Thank you for coming out to our final focus group discussion about your experiences with the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program.

The purpose of this meeting is to get a final set of impressions about your experiences with the Program. As we have stated for the last three years, your open and honest comments about your experiences with the Opportunity Scholarship Program will help to improve it.

We will essentially explore the same questions we discussed with you last year with a few exceptions.

- This year we would like you to share more about how the Program has altered the way you think or behavior, as well as any changes you have noticed in your children.
- We also have several interactive elements in the focus groups, which are designed to allow you to explain why you might hold a particularly position on some of the issues.

This year we would like you to state your name each time you speak. I will also repeat your names after you speak so that we can keep an accurate record of your comments.

We have divided the questions into three sections with a goal of completing the discussion in 90 minutes or less.

**Ask other team members in the room to introduce themselves. Note that they are here to observe and take notes.**

**Ok, let's get reacquainted by going around the table and introducing ourselves, giving only our first name and the grade your child is currently in.**

#### II. (Past) Reflections on the first two or three years of the OSP (30 minutes)

- **Interactive element:**
  - Think back two or three years when you were deciding which school you would select, what is the difference between what you expected from the school you choose then versus what you have experienced thus far? (what factors met or didn't meet your expectation)
  - Thinking back again, what information and other resources were most helpful? What information and other resources were least helpful? If you have transferred schools, what resources were helpful?
- What have been your most least and positive experiences with OSP?
- Do you regret leaving the public school system? Are there any changes taking place within the public schools that might encourage you to go back?

### III. (Present) Program impact and family satisfaction (25 minutes)

- How is the Program currently impacting your children?
  - What are the most obvious signs of change in your child's attitudes or behaviors?
- **Interactive element:**
  - How do you define and measure success? What outcomes are most important to you?
- At this point, do you think your child will remain in the OSP next year? If not, why?

### IV. (Future) Family predictions about their children's future and the future of OSP (25 minutes)

- How has the OSP influenced your child's chances for success, i.e. making better grades, graduating from high school, and attending college?
- **Interactive element:**
  - Do you think the Program should be extended beyond the first five years? Assuming they support extending it, what do you think you can do to help extend the Program? (**Who is responsible? Is this a parent or school responsibility (record their list of responses a short list)?**)
- Policy makers will be making a decision about the Program, what might you say to them if you had an opportunity? What can you do to get your point across about improving the Program? What advice would you make to policy makers about improving the Program?
- *Should school choice be offered to other low income parents?*

### V. Wrap-up and extend invitation for reviewers (5 minutes)

I would like to remind you all that this is our last focus group. We will spend this next few months writing our last report. We would like to extend an invitation to any of you who would like to review the final draft and provide us comments. We will provide you a modest stipend for your time. Whose is interested?

Did anyone have any final comments or questions?

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Thank you all for coming today. We appreciate the time you took to sit down and share with us

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Total Planned Time: 90 minutes



## About the Authors



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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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