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The Evolution of School Choice Consumers: Parent and Student Voices on the Second Year of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program

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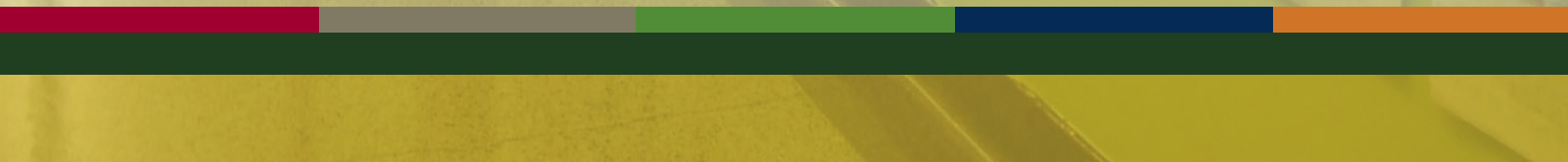
The Evolution of School Choice Consumers: Parent and Student Voices

on the Second Year of the D.C. 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.

Led by Patrick Wolf, 21st Century Chair in School Choice, University of Arkansas, SCDP is playing a central role in efforts to evaluate the country's first federally sponsored K-12 scholarship initiative: The DC Opportunity Scholarship Program. In partnership with Westat and Chesapeake Research Associates, SCDP is conducting the official evaluation of the Program's impact using a Randomized Control Trial research design. With support from private foundations, SCDP also is conducting mixed-method investigations into the possible competitive effects of the Opportunity Scholarship Program on the performance of public schools, the behavioral response of educators to the program, its effects on private school capacity and school integration, the effects of charter schools on real estate values and demographics, and how parents and students are experiencing this important new federal education initiative.

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Executive Summary

In the 50 years since economist Milton Friedman published "The Role of Government in Education"¹ scholars and policy makers have been debating how parental choice through market mechanisms can and does operate in education. Market "optimists" argue that education is a service that can be produced under a variety of arrangements and that parents are natural education consumers.² Market "pessimists" argue that education is a public good that should be produced in government-run schools, and that school choice programs suffer "market failure" because only advantaged families will have the resources and experience to choose effectively.³ These academic debates continue to this day.

The Opportunity Scholarship Program and Parent and Student Voices Study

On January 23, 2004, President Bush signed the DC School Choice Incentive Act into law.⁴ 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 and is designed to provide approximately 1,700 low-income DC children with tuition scholarships worth up to \$7,500 to cover the costs of attending participating K-12 nonpublic schools in the District. In December of 2006, Congress amended the DC School Choice Incentive Act to increase the continuing eligibility requirements from 200 percent of the poverty line to 300 percent for families already enrolled in the program.⁵ The pilot program is authorized to operate for five years and is being implemented by a group of non-profit organizations headed by the Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF).

In addition to extending educational choices to an economically disadvantaged group of DC families, the OSP also provides the opportunity to learn more about what happens when more families have the opportunity and responsibility to choose a private school for their children. The U.S. Department of Education, through the Institute for Education Sciences, has contracted for the conduct of a rigorous experimental evaluation of the impact of the Program on a number of student outcomes including student achievement. Here we provide information from a separate, independent, qualitative assessment of how families are experiencing the Program, including why they are seeking choice, how

¹ Milton Friedman, "The Role of Government in Education," in Robert Solo (ed.), *Economics and the Public Interest* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955).

² See Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (Washington: Brookings, 1990).

³ See John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916); Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Helen F. Ladd, *Market-Based Reforms in Urban Education* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2002); Henry L. Levin, "Educational Vouchers: Effectiveness, Choice, and Costs," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 17 (June 1998).

⁴ 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.

⁵ Tax Relief and Health Care Act of 2006, H.R. 6111§ 404. (2006).

they are selecting schools, what challenges they are facing, and how parents, students, schools, and the OSP are working to try to realize the goals of the Program. Included in the report is information about what seems to be working well, what problems have been encountered along the way, and recommendations from parents and students regarding how the Program can better serve their needs.

The information presented in this report was gleaned from 28 personal interviews in the fall of 2005 and 12 focus groups conducted in the spring of 2006 with the parents and older students of approximately 100 families participating in the OSP. Although the participating families are broadly representative of the Program's client population, they are likely to be somewhat more highly motivated than typical OSP families due to their willingness to take extra time to share their experiences with us. Thus, readers should exercise caution in drawing firm conclusions about the OSP as a whole based merely upon the collective experiences of these 100 self-selected families.

Although this study is not, and cannot be, a rigorous impact evaluation of the Program, it does chronicle the experience of a large and diverse group of OSP families during implementation of the pilot program. The report allows participating parents and students to speak freely and extensively to policy makers, implementers, researchers, and the broader public about what is happening in their lives as a result of enrolling in this new school choice initiative.

The voices of OSP parents and students tell a complex story of hope, opportunity, challenge, effort, occasional frustration, and general satisfaction. The participants themselves expressed how important they think it is that interested stakeholders hear and understand the story of their experiences in this new and ambitious educational program.

Specific Findings from the Second Year

Most of the material in the main body of the report consists of actual quotes from parents and students regarding matters that are central to the theoretical and policy debates surrounding school choice. A representative selection of participant quotes is available in the summary document that accompanies this more comprehensive report.⁶ For this executive summary, we simply provide our own overview of the pattern of responses that we encountered while analyzing the qualitative focus group data. The summary is presented in the order in which the material appears in the comprehensive report that follows.

The following core research questions and sub-questions guide our discussion in the Second year report:

- Q1.** *How has the consumer behavior of OSP families changed since the beginning of the Program, especially regarding their consumer skills?*

⁶ Stephen Q. Cornman, Thomas Stewart, Patrick J. Wolf, *The Evolution of School Choice Consumers, Parent and Student Voices on the Second Year of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program*, Georgetown University, Washington DC, April, 2007, SCDP 2007-01 SUM. The summary report is available for download in text or audio format and in English or Spanish at www.georgetown.edu/research/scdp.

Q2. *What opportunities or challenges have the families experienced in their new schools?*

S1. *What adjustments have the families made to their new reality?*

S1. *What support or resources do families need to meet the demands associated with their new schools?*

I. How has the Consumer Behavior of OSP Families Changed Since the Beginning of the Program?

How do Parents Develop Consumer Skills

The families participating in the OSP and in this focus group study entered the Program in the fall of 2004 and 2005. We refer to the families that entered in 2004 as Cohort 1 (C-1) and those that entered in 2005 as Cohort 2 (C-2). Approximately 1 ½ years into the OSP, most C-1 families report opinions and behaviors that are generally consistent with being active and knowledgeable school choice consumers.

A. What do Families Look for in Private Schools?

Families cited many factors that they looked for in private schools that were consistent with the findings in the first year of the OSP such as smaller class size, a more rigorous curriculum and safety.⁷

The findings in the second year of the Parent and Student Voices evaluation were different in the following manner. The parents from Cohort 1 (C-1) sought more direct teacher attention for their children and focused more on a high academic quality. The Cohort 2 (C-2) families' priorities revolve around academic quality by virtue of their comments on class size, teacher qualifications, and requests for information pertaining to school achievement. Cohort 2 parents made fewer references to religious orientation of the schools, foreign languages and racial diversity, than did Cohort 1 parents.

The C-2 parents also place a high premium on safety. The parents are very concerned that the general school and classroom environments are consistently manageable through small class size, order, and discipline, responses that are very similar to those of the C-1 families when they first entered the program.

B. How do Parents use Information to Select Schools

The accurate and timely information about the Program and the participating schools emerged as a crucial theme in both the first and second year of the program. The importance of reliable, easily accessible and abundant information is one of the most

⁷ Stewart, Thomas, Patrick J. Wolf, Stephen Q. Cornman, *Parent and Student Voices on the First Year of the Opportunity Scholarship Program*, Peabody Journal of Education 82, forthcoming in 2007.

consistent issues expressed by all parents. Parents indicated that accurate information was crucial for them to find a good match for their children. The accurate information is critical for the foundation of consumer choice skills. Parents in both C-1 and C-2 clamored for more information. In findings that were consistent with those in the first year of the Program, parents were extremely concerned about the accuracy of the directory of schools and the representations made by school officials. As in the first year, parents also requested WSF to verify school descriptive information.

In the second year of the program, parents were seeking more evaluative information, rather than descriptive information about the schools. For example, many parents were seeking more information on achievement test results in the second year.

II. What Opportunities or Challenges have the Families Experienced in Their New Schools?

A. Do Parents' Consumer Choice Skills play a Role in Meeting Their Expectations?

In many cases C-1 families developed school choice skills that continued into the second year of the program. Many parents utilized consumer skills to make decisions such as remaining in the school they initially started in, transferring schools within the OSP, or exiting the program. Many parents reported that finding the "perfect match" for their children was very difficult. Finding the perfect match revolved around maximizing the amount of individual attention the child received, the academic orientation or emphasis of the school, and communication between parents, teachers and administrators. Parents of students in various grades stated that the day to day atmosphere at the schools was different from what they expected from the school visit. If the parents expectations were not met, families used their consumer skills to more carefully review the directory, visit on average more than 3 schools, meet administrators, sit in on classes and consult other parents. The parents seeking a transfer were very knowledgeable and informed.

B. How do Parents and Students Adjust to New Challenges

The greatest challenge cited by the parents was finding the time and energy to be involved in their child's life at school. It was striking how involved parents in the OSP program were with their children's life experiences. Our research suggests that one of the most positive consequences of the OSP is that parental involvement with their child's education has increased. Parents of high school, middle school and elementary students across both cohorts in the first and second year of the OSP emphatically stated that their parental involvement had dramatically increased when their children entered the OSP program. The majority of parents were willing to make the sacrifice to work with their

children on an individual basis. The parents' involvement primarily focused on the child's individual school work. The majority of parents also spend their time, energy, resources to ancillary activities sponsored by the independent schools.

While the parents in the second year of the program continued to apply their developing consumer skills to better communication with teachers and school administrators, their parental involvement stopped short of participation in organized school and parent groups.

C. Has Communication between Parents and Children Improved?

Parents were enthusiastic about the improved communication between parents and children that they perceived in their children since they entered the OSP.

D. How Satisfied are Families with the New School Choice Program?

After nearly two years in the OSP, parents by and large are very satisfied with their school choice experiences. The parents evaluated the school choice they had made and their satisfaction levels by assessing student attitudes toward learning, their work ethic, and the students' high levels of self-esteem. They evaluated the school choice and satisfaction based on seeing their child situated in a school where the conditions and resources necessary for learning and future student achievement are in place. Most parents cited changes in their children's attitudes about learning as the main source of their satisfaction.

Approximately ninety percent of the parents interviewed and participating in focus groups indicated that they were certain to remain in the Program for at least another year. All of the Hispanic parents interviewed reported that their children would remain in the program. Though the general level of satisfaction is high, a small number of parents were not satisfied with their school choice decision. Parents were very satisfied with the OSP administrator-the Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF).

E. Has the OSP Improved Since the Inception of the Program?

Many parents expressed the view that programmatic problems during the initial year of implementation, such as ambiguity about financial policies and student confidentiality, have been resolved to their satisfaction. The C-1 parents also embraced improvements that they have observed in the program, especially in the areas of sound financial policies and procedures; better communication between parents and teachers and administrators; effective confidentiality policies, and protection against stigmatization. The majority of parents in C-1 and C-2 reported feeling comfortable in the program in stark contrast to the first year when some parents said that their child had been "singled out." Most students in the second year of the program reported that they were not being treated



differently than their peers. Although the parents were almost unanimous in their assessment that the participating schools and the program implementer had made great strides in maintaining confidentiality, the confidentiality issue remained a profound concern of a number of parents.

In the first year of the OSP, the majority of parents indicated that the finance and reimbursement policies lacked clarity. In stark contrast, this year parents praised how financial matters were being handled by WSF and by schools. The parents also reported that the communication on financial policies and procedures dramatically improved.

F. What other factors impact the families' ability to utilize the Opportunity Scholarship?

The question of how satisfied families will be with their school choice experience in the end appears to be contingent on several issues.

1. Earning Out

The single greatest concern among parents is that they will earn out of eligibility for the Program and thus be forced to remove their child from the school they have chosen. Earning out of the Program was the dominant issue of the second year. Earning out was spontaneously brought up by parents in 63% of the focus groups. Parents spoke not only about concern over earning out of the Program but also about specific steps they felt they had to take in order to avoid losing their child's scholarship. These steps included turning down job promotions, cutting back on work hours, or forgoing better housing options in more affordable areas immediately surrounding the District of Columbia. These parents were poised to be more entrepreneurial, to fully embrace a consumer mentality and engage in the sorts of activities that held the promise of producing greater upward mobility for their children; but they encountered an obstacle in the form of the earn-out threshold - a common component of government programs with which participants must manage.

In December of 2006, Congress amended the DC School Choice Incentive Act to increase the continuing eligibility requirements from 200 percent of the poverty line to 300 percent for families who were already enrolled in the Program as of the 2004-05 or 2005-06 school year.⁸

2. Dearth of slots at the high school level

A sizeable group of middle and high school parents report that the systemic constraint of unavailability of slots at the high school level is threatening the viability of the Program. The lack of available slots at the high school level caused a small number of premature exits from the Program.

3. Sibling Preferences following Scholarship Award

In a theme that was consistent with the reports of parents in the first year Parent and Student Voices report, some parents mentioned that the lottery should permit siblings to be simultaneously awarded scholarships.

⁸ Tax Relief and Health Care Act of 2006, H.R. 6111 § 404. (2006).

G. What Support Services do OSP Families Need?

Parents were reluctant to ask for support services for adult family members. However, some parents indicated that transportation was an important service that would provide immeasurable help in getting their children to the independent schools. Some parents pointed out that tutoring should not be limited to children performing below grade level.

Implications for Further Research –The Next Steps

We have learned a great deal about how families experienced the first two years of the Opportunity Scholarship Program, including how they chose schools and addressed various responsibilities and challenges associated with being an education consumer. We found that the majority of parents are active and knowledgeable school choice consumers. Certain systemic constraints such as the “earn out” eligibility provision and the dearth of slots at the high school level appear to be limiting the experiences of OSP parents and students as new education consumers.

As we continue listening to Parent and Student Voices on the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, we will pay particular attention to this issue of consumer attitudes and behaviors. Do parents in the study shift in perceptible ways and degrees over time to a greater reliance on consumer attitudes and behaviors? We will also probe whether participating families are engaging as active citizens in society. These and other related questions will be central to our continuing study of Parent and Student Voices on the Opportunity Scholarship Program.





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Introduction

This report presents information about the experiences of families participating in the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) during its second year of operation. Previously we reported on parent and student focus group responses regarding the initial implementation of the OSP.¹ This study extends that analysis to capture the 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 two years into the program and Cohort 2 families after one year encapsulated in this report shed new light on many of the issues pertaining to the consumer behavior of low income families pursuing new school choice options. Specifically, we found that parents remain generally enthusiastic about their child's participation in the OSP. By far the greatest concern expressed by parents was that their household income might increase enough so that their child would "earn-out" of program eligibility. In a positive change from the first year of the OSP, parents reported that problems of insufficient information about program finances and some students being singled out as OSP participants, findings we reported in our previous version of this study, were remedied in the second year of program implementation. Some parents continued to request additional school and programmatic information – particularly comparative test score data -- so that they could be more effective educational consumers. This finding about the parents' information fits with what other school choice researchers

footnotes

¹ Stewart, Thomas, Patrick J. Wolf, Stephen Q. Cornman, *Parent and Student Voices on the First Year of the Opportunity Scholarship Program*, Peabody Journal of Education 82, forthcoming in 2007.

² Wolf, Patrick, 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, April 2006, NCEE 2006-4003; 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, Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Washington, DC, April 2005. Both reports are available at www.ed.gov/ies/ncee.

³ Friedman, Milton. "The Role of Government in Education" in Robert Solo (ed.), *Economics and the Public Interest* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955).

⁴ See for example Friedman, Milton. *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916); Gutmann, Amy. *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Chubb, John E. and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (Washington: Brookings, 1990); Ladd, Helen F. *Market-Based Reforms in Urban Education* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2002); Howell, William G. and Paul E. Peterson, with Patrick J. Wolf and David E. Campbell, *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2002); Levin, Henry L. "Educational Vouchers: Effectiveness, Choice, and Costs," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. 17, (June 1998).

⁵ Fuller, Bruce, Richard F. Elmore, and Gary Orfield,

have previously found in the District of Columbia, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Denver, Colorado – some parents feel under-informed about comparative academic information.

This report on the OSP is a privately-funded qualitative study that is fully separate from the quantitative evaluation of the program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education.² Our goal is to augment such statistical studies of school choice impacts with contextual detail that chronicles what participating families are seeing, feeling, needing, and doing as they take part in this first-ever federal school voucher program.

In many respects, the public debate about how educational market mechanisms influence parental behavior began roughly 50 years ago when economist Milton Friedman published "The Role of Government in Education."³ Since that time, scholars, policy makers and other interested stakeholders have been debating how parental choice through market mechanisms can, does, and should operate in education. These arguments have largely centered on three related but also distinct questions:

1. Is K-12 education largely a public or private good?
2. Are neighborhood public schools the "best" structures for delivering K-12 education?
3. What is necessary for parents to be effective consumers of education?

Although lively and informative exchanges have taken place regarding the first two questions,⁴ and they remain important items of contention regarding school choice, this study speaks to the question of the challenges that low-income parents face when they are provided with the opportunity to choose their child's school and what programmatic supports might be most helpful to them in discharging that responsibility.

Over the last twenty years, public charter schools, voucher programs and other school choice options have strongly influenced a growing body of literature on how school choice works in practice, shedding light on a number of long standing academic disputes and policy questions. Still, much remains to be learned about how families with low

incomes or other educational disadvantages respond to the new opportunities made available to them through school choice programs. For example, Bruce Fuller and his colleagues claim that: “Many policy wonks and commentators know very little about the cultural logics employed by different types of families as parents attempt to make sense of, and benefit from,” public school choice arrangements.⁵ Moreover, how school choice programs are designed, and the real-world context in which they are implemented, will strongly influence their success.⁶ As James Coleman and Thomas Hoffer explain, “If the aim of social policy is not merely to make schools function well, but to make it possible for parents, including those who constitute deficient families, to raise their children well, then policy must address the broader question of what parents need if they are to raise their children, and how these needs may be met.”⁷

Our purpose in holding personal interviews and focus group discussions with families participating in the OSP is precisely to better understand the reality within which this new school choice program is operating. Like Amy 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.”⁸ After all, if one wants to know why and how parents and students choose schools, why not speak with them directly?

Though the body of literature on this subject is increasing, still precious little qualitative research has been conducted on the experiences of financially under resourced families with school choice programs, specifically in the early stages or phases of their experience.⁹ More specifically, research has not captured the attitudinal and behavioral transformations that may or may not be part of the experiences of families new to school choice programs like the OSP. Thus, this study will rely exclusively on personal interviews and focus group discussions with students and parents as the primary data gathering methods used to capture the lived experiences of some of the families of the OSP.

“Policy Making in the Dark: Illuminating the School Choice Debate,” 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. 13.

⁶ Henig, Jeffrey. *Rethinking School Choice, Limits of the Market Metaphor*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ: 1994., pp. 22, 232; Fuller et al., “Policy Making in the Dark...” pp. 12-13, op cit 5; 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. 200; James Harvey and Lydia Rainey, *Doing Choice Right: Proceedings of a Meeting on Communities and Choice* (Center on Reinventing Public Education: University of Washington, 2004) p. 10.

⁷ Coleman, James S. and Thomas Hoffer, *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities* (New York: Basic, 1987) – Introductory Chapter, p 19.

⁸ 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.

⁹ For a notable exception, see Abigail and Stephen Thernstrom, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2003).

The following core research questions and sub-questions guide our discussion in the Second year report:

- Q1.** *How has the consumer behavior of OSP families developed since the beginning of the Program, especially regarding their consumer skills?*
- Q2.** *What opportunities or challenges have the families experienced in their new schools?*
 - S1.** *What adjustments have the families made to their new reality?*
 - S2.** *What support or resources do families need to meet the demands associated with their new schools?*

For the first research question of how has the consumer behavior of families developed, we examine the extent to which the Cohort 1 (C-1) parents are confident in their capacity to operate as knowledgeable and well informed school choice consumers. For Cohort 2 (C-2) parents, we analyze the extent to which they felt well prepared to exercise school choice for the first time during the second year of overall program implementation. The possible contrasts between Cohorts 1 and 2 are instructive here, as Cohort 1 exercised school choice in the context of a brand new program, while Cohort 2 entered a more mature and fully developed program with informational supports that were not available to Cohort 1.

For the second research question pertaining to the opportunities, challenges, and adjustments of choice, we examine how the C-1 families have developed consumer skills and continue to refine them in the second year of the program. We also determine how C-1 families retrospectively evaluate the choice that they made and what happens if they think that they have not made an appropriate choice. We also analyze the impact systemic constraints and challenges have on parent behavior. We analyze whether the school choice consumer strives to obtain as much information as possible for making their choice or becomes comfortable with a satisfactory and attainable level of knowledge and opportunity regarding educational services for their children.

In addition to describing the experiences of families participating in the OSP, we will attempt to provide a framework for contextualizing their experiences. Given the broader

discussion about school reform in America, which disproportionately focuses on the supply side or school choice options, we will use the data provided by the families to illuminate a less discussed but equally important aspect of school reform – the demand side or the education consumer. The OSP provides an exceptional opportunity to examine the consumer behavior of families who historically have not had the wherewithal to attend private and independent schools in the District of Columbia.

Market-based education reforms, explicitly or tacitly, place expectations on parents to think and behave as “rational actors.” Purely rational actors have clearly ordered preferences, perfect information, and are confident in asserting their interests. Consumer assertiveness is one of the underlying assumptions of the rational actor model and will be a primary topic of inquiry in this report. What are the challenges that can impede the development of consumer assertiveness? What are the resources that can accelerate it? These are some of the questions that are central to this report.

We do not claim that the success of market-based education reforms such as school choice are entirely dependent on all participants behaving as pure rational actors. No market requires such absolute perfection to function. In fact, one of the claimed virtues of markets is that they operate reasonably well in the breach, even when preferences are somewhat muddy, information is skimpy, and motivation is a bit lax. As Schneider, Teske, and Marschall have argued, not every auto purchaser need be a mechanic for General Motors to feel pressured to build more reliable cars.¹⁰ Similarly, only a small subset of parents need be sophisticated “marginal choosers” for schools of choice to feel that they must deliver a quality product in order to stay in the business of education. Market-based education reforms likely operate better the more parents engage in assertive consumer behavior, but we make no sweeping claims that such behavior must be either extreme or universal.

The OSP, therefore, offers a rare contemporary opportunity to examine prominent theories and advance research on school choice. Each section of this report begins with a brief summary of the school choice research findings on that particular topic in an attempt to place the parent and student voices into a broader and deeper context.

¹⁰ Mark Schneider, Paul Teske, and Melissa Marschall, *Choosing Schools: Consumer Choice and the Quality of American Schools* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) – Chapter 8.

After each summary, we present the salient findings from the second year qualitative evidence.¹⁰ Finally, in an attempt to clarify or verify the information provided by the students and parents, a group of staff members from WSF were interviewed. When and where necessary, their views and insights on the issues are included to provide a more comprehensive and updated perspective on the issue.

Research Methodology Overview

In an attempt to expand our knowledge about the influence of the OSP on the participating families, the SCDP proposed complementing the government-funded quantitative analysis with a qualitative study. *Parent and Student Voices on the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program* seeks to provide a rare view of the implementation and effect of a publicly funded school voucher program from the vantage point of the participants. The primary goal of this ongoing study is to chronicle the lived experiences of families participating in the Program. These families include those who entered the program in its inaugural year, as well as those who entered the Program in its second year (the year in which it reached full capacity). In addition to gaining insight into how families are affected by the Program, the study also allows families the opportunity to provide recommendations about critical features of the OSP.

This qualitative study focuses on about 110 families, representing approximately 180 students that were awarded scholarships through the OSP. Sixty of these families began the program in its inaugural year (Cohort 1) and the other fifty began the program in its second year (Cohort 2). In the first year of the study, we conducted focus group sessions with Cohort 1 families in the fall of 2004 and the spring of 2005. In the second year, we conducted personal interviews with Cohort 1 families in the fall of 2005 and focus groups with Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 families in the spring of 2006. The decision was made to switch the fall 2005 method of communication from focus groups to personal interviews based on a recommendation made in response to our report *Parent and Student Voices on the First Year of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program* as well as the desire to encourage more personal comments. Whereas focus groups create a dynamic atmosphere

in which participants can play off one another's comments, personal interviews encourage participants to share more intimate experiences and opinions. Thus, we invited our original Cohort 1 families, consisting of families with (1) elementary, (2) middle and (3) high school age students, as well as a special group for (4) Spanish speaking families, to participate in personal, one-on-one interviews. (see Outreach to Parents in Appendix B.)

In the spring of 2006, we returned to a focus group method of communication and invited Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 families to participate in separate focus group sessions. Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 families were broken down into (1) elementary, (2) middle, (3) high school and (4) Spanish speaking focus groups. Whereas Cohort 1 families were fairly evenly distributed amongst the four groups, Cohort 2 families had fewer high school families. The lower number of high school families was a direct result of having limited the sample size to only high school families jointly participating in both the OSP and Capital Partners for Education (CPE) tutoring service (see Outreach to Parents in Appendix B).

There were 28 personal interviews with Cohort 1 parents, and 12 focus groups with families from Cohort 1 and 2. We coded the transcripts from each focus group, specifically teasing out the salient and varied responses within each group. Once the individual focus group summaries were completed, the entire research team met to compare and contrast the findings across the four groups. The entire methodology section can be found annexed hereto in Appendix B.

Below we discuss the results of our qualitative study of OSP parents and students. Most of the information is presented as specific quotes of participants, in their actual words. When multiple participants provided responses very similar to the one quoted, the count of responses appears after the "parent" or "student" designation, in parentheses. In this way, we seek to convey both the authenticity of actual participant statements as well as a sense of how representative those statements were of broader participant opinion.







How has the Consumer Behavior of OSP Families Changed Since the Beginning of the Program?

The family perceptions regarding changes in their attitudes and behavior has been chronicled below by examining “What do Families Look for in Private Schools” and “How do Parents use Information to Select Schools.”

How do Parents Develop Consumer Skills?

Approximately 1 ½ years into the OSP, most C-1 families report opinions and behaviors that are generally consistent with being active and knowledgeable school choice consumers. As participants in a government program that requires them to select their child’s school, the parents need to draw upon different sets of skills. The first set of skills could be called application skills, and include the personal initiative and the ability to assemble and deliver documents that demonstrate the person’s eligibility for government programs that deliver benefits, as well as behavioral adjustments to ensure continued program eligibility.¹¹ It is rational behavior for the parents to rely upon the application skills to negotiate access to and use the benefits of the scholarship. At the

¹¹ See Raymond, Margaret, Joan Rogers, James Glasenapp, Mary Eastman, Cynthia Rapp, Christine Lehmann, Child Assistance Program, Process Evaluation Final Report, Raymond Associates, Inc. March 1998. Margaret Raymond has conducted research that indicates some economically disadvantaged parents in a child assistance program have a tendency to engage in benefits maximizing behavior. Raymond found that there is a different kind of value maximization strategy that public assistance clients use. The strategy has to do with maximizing benefits under the budget constraint of losing their eligibility. Raymond asserts that there is evidence of pretty sophisticated calculations across system recipients. The benefits maximizing behavior involves parents utilizing a substantial set of skills they have acquired in previously negotiating receipt of governmental benefits including TANF; food stamps; housing stipends; reduced and free lunch; day care and supplemental services.

same time, they likely will need to develop and exercise consumer skills, as well, if they are to maximize the opportunity scholarship benefits for their children.

In the first year of the program we witnessed OSP parents working to develop consumer skills to complement the application skills that had permitted them to gain access to the program. Here we examine if C-2 parents developed and exercised consumer skills in a similar manner or if their experience has been different than that of C-1 parents in the inaugural year of the program.

A. What do Families Look for in Private Schools?

The specific school preferences that influence the attitudes and behaviors 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.”¹³ If parents do not really know what to look for in a school, or they seek objectionable conditions such as racial uniformity, then their educational choices will be unlikely to yield the desired educational outcomes they are seeking for their child.

One issue about which researchers disagree is the extent to which all choosing parents prefer the same school characteristics or preferences vary across individuals or groups of parents. Edward Fisk and Helen Ladd claim that parents appear to be uni-dimensional in their preferences for schools. They rank schools consistently in their “quality,” and define quality exclusively based on the socio-economic status of the student body.¹⁴ Elmore and Fuller agree that choosing parents “seem to have preferences that are remarkably similar across race and social class.”¹⁵ Mark Schneider and Jack Buckley discovered that, when researching DC public schools on the Internet, parents frequently searched on the demographics of the student body and honed in on schools with lower percentages of African-Americans as their searches deepened.¹⁶ Gill and his colleagues, in a review of the school choice literature, conclude that, where choice programs are available to a significant number of white students, white parents tend to select schools “with fewer minority students, whereas minority families tended to request transfers to schools with

¹³ Fuller et al, “Policy Making in the Dark...,” p. 3, op cit 5.

¹⁴ Fiske, Edward B and Helen F. Ladd, *When Schools Compete: A Cautionary Tale* (Washington: Brookings, 2000), pp. 195-198.

¹⁵ Elmore and Fuller, “Empirical Research on Educational Choice...,” p. 192.

¹⁶ Schneider, Mark and Jack Buckley, “What do Parents Want from Schools? Evidence from the Internet,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 24:2, (2002).

¹⁷ Gill, Brian P., 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.

higher proportions of minority students.”¹⁷ Elmore and Fuller conclude that there is “little evidence that active choosers are looking for distinctive educational programs when they make their choices.”¹⁸

These studies of parental preferences all took place within the context of choice programs that were open to all families, regardless of income and race. It may be that low-income African American families, in particular, seek conditions besides the socioeconomic status and race of peers when selecting schools. Several studies of means-tested school choice programs suggest that may be the case. In reviewing an important study by Saporito and Lareau, Hamilton and Guin conclude that “race was not a factor in [African American families’] school choice decisions. School poverty rates, however, did have a modest impact on the schools selected by African-American families.”¹⁹ They continue “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.”²⁰

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.”²¹ For instance, parents who are African American or lack a college degree are much more likely to list high test scores as the most important characteristic of a school.²² 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 most likely to describe “academic quality” as the most important reason for their selection, with school safety, discipline, and location as additional important concerns.²³ In other words: “Any differentiation along SES and racial lines in the choice of schools will not necessarily result from parents of higher SES strategically placing their children in the best schools. Rather, differences may emerge as the result of “sorting,” in which lower SES parents stress a different set of values in education and choose schools that reflect the different dimensions of education they view as important.”²⁴

¹⁸ Elmore and Fuller, “Empirical Research on Educational Choice...,” p. 199.

¹⁹ Hamilton, L.S., & Guin, K., *Understanding how families choose schools*. In J. R. Betts & T. Loveless (Eds.), *Getting choice right: Ensuring equity and efficiency in education policy* (pp.44). Washington, DC: Brookings, (2005).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²¹ Schneider, Mark, Paul Teske, and Melissa Marschall, *Choosing Schools: Consumer Choice and the Quality of American Schools* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 107.

²² Schneider, Mark, Melissa Marschall, Paul Teske, Christine Roch, “School Choice and Culture Wars in the Classroom: What Different Parents Seek from Education,” *Social Science Quarterly*, 79:3, September 1998, p496-498.

²³ Wolf, et al, Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, p. C-7, op cit 2; Wolf, Patrick J., 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.

²⁴ Schneider, et al, “School Choice and Culture Wars in the Classroom: What Different Parents Seek from Education,” p 489, op cit 22.

When families send their children to the assigned neighborhood public school, they need not engage in extensive activities in order to make that happen. In many cases they have already done their research, checking out the quality of the local public schools as a key factor in their decision to buy or rent a residence in the neighborhood. Once their residence is established, enrolling their children in the neighborhood public school is simply a matter of completing some paperwork during a single school visit.

Exercising school choice requires parents to engage in a much more extensive set of consumer-oriented activities. If the choice mechanism is a publicly-funded voucher or privately-funded scholarship, they need to apply to and be accepted by the program even as they begin the process of choosing schools. School search itself can involve any number of activities including gathering written information about schools, discussing options within family social networks, and visiting schools. All of those activities are centered on matching school information with a parent's own view of what they want and need, educationally, for their child. Parental schooling preferences, therefore, are an excellent place to begin.

In the inaugural year of the OSP in 2004-05, we found that parents listed a variety of reasons for their school choices, the most common being smaller class size, school safety, and a religious or values based environment.²⁵ These findings were repeated in the second year of the OSP, with a stronger emphasis on academic quality. The majority of parents look for small class size, a challenging academic program, and a safe environment when they are choosing schools. Location and transportation considerations were mentioned by a moderate number of parents. Religious orientation was cited by a very small percentage of parents as one of the characteristics they looked for. A religious orientation was a more crucial characteristic for Hispanic parents (see Appendix Table 1).²⁶

The dominant characteristic that parents of students of all ages look for in the scholarship program is smaller classes. In fact, many parents of elementary, middle and high school students in both their first (Cohort 2) and second (Cohort 1) year of

²⁵ Stewart, Thomas, Patrick J. Wolf, and Stephen Q. Cornman, *Parent and Student Voices on the First Year of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program*, School Choice Demonstration Project, Georgetown University, October 2005, SCDP Report 05-01, pg. 11, available at www.georgetown.edu/research/scdp. We also found that parents sought a more rigorous academic curriculum, the opportunity to learn foreign languages, racial diversity and close proximity to their home.

²⁶ Parent: "Their learning experience is important and above all, religion, their learning good manners." PSV Focus Group, Hispanic Parents, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

the OSP responded that small class size was the first characteristic that they were seeking.²⁷ The parents were also interested in the qualifications of the teachers in these smaller classrooms.

Parent (6): *I was really, really interested in trying to get my son in a smaller class.*²⁸

Parent: *I was looking for smaller classroom settings so they have better management over the classroom.*²⁹

As in the first year of the OSP, safety was a characteristic that was deemed important by parents, particularly parents of high school students. Safety was deemed important by parents in both the first and second year of the program.

Parent (4): *I think safety was a lot of reasons why most parents chose different schools was safety also that was a big issue, safety.*³⁰

Parents with older children frequently expressed their desire for and perceived the private schools as places that offered a more “structured” or “disciplined” environment.

Parent (3): *I wanted structure cause where she came from, she'd been in public and charters all her life, I just wanted a change, a better structure, safety, a better environment, a better learning system for her and I got that, through the scholarship program. I love the school she's in.*³¹

Parent: *I believed private school [has] better discipline and academics.*³²

Many participating parents link school discipline, safety, and classroom management together as clustered characteristics, and associate them with the private schooling opportunity made available to their children through the OSP.

Summary

The evidence to date suggests that parents in general have a strong preference for academic quality in the schools they select, with a diverse set of secondary preferences centered on order and discipline as well as convenience. The C-2 families priorities revolve around academic quality by virtue of their comments on class size, teacher qualifications, and requests for information pertaining to school achievement. The

²⁷ PSV Focus Groups, Parent of Middle School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

²⁸ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Middle School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

²⁹ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Elementary School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

³⁰ PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

³¹ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Middle School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

³² PSV Focus Group, Parent of Middle School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

C-2 parents also place a high premium on safety. The parents are very concerned that the general school and classroom environments are consistently manageable through small class size, order, and discipline, responses that are very similar to those of the C-1 families when they first entered the program.

The findings in the second year of the Parent and Student Voices evaluation were different in the following manner. The parents from C-1 sought more direct teacher attention for their children and focused more on a high academic quality. Cohort 2 parents were more focused on academic quality, to wit — teacher qualifications and achievement data on participating schools. Cohort 2 parents made fewer references to religious orientation of the schools, foreign languages and racial diversity.

B. How do parents use information to select schools?

What advice does previous research offer regarding the school selection process? In general, it recommends that a wide variety of choices and lots of useful information be made available to families, that parents be given primary influence over the admission decision, and that the students themselves play a role in the selection process. Hamilton and Guin conclude that “Parental choice is obviously constrained by the options available to them, and in many cases the options are quite limited.”³³ When parents have a variety of schooling choices, for example schools in the suburbs as well as the inner-city, they are more likely to find a school that is a good fit for their child's particular needs. When choices are limited and the schools themselves make the admission decision, the chances of a desirable placement can be significantly reduced. For example, Fiske and Ladd report that not all parents in New Zealand's universal choice program had viable choices, given a shortage of alternatives and out-of-pocket expenses required to enroll in desired schools. Since oversubscribed schools were allowed to choose their students, “Parental choice, in short, gave way to school choice.”³⁴

There also is some evidence that involving students in the school choice can increase the likelihood that the school placement will persist or “stick.” Reviewing evidence from their study of a San Antonio school choice program, Kenneth Godwin and Frank Kemerer

³³ Hamilton and Guin, p. 43, op cit 19.

³⁴ Fiske and Ladd, *When Schools Compete...*, pp. 8-9, op cit 14.

suggest that, “When families were deciding whether to remain in or drop out of a choice program, the child played a major role in the decision. If the child had been involved in the original decision, had the same ambitions as the parents, and had close friends in the choice school, then the family was likely to remain in the program.”³⁵ Thus, student preferences and advice can be an additional source of information for the savvy “marginal consumer” of educational options.

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 web-surfers. Although there is general agreement that informed consumers help to make markets work properly, obtaining quality information on public goods can be difficult since “shopping for public goods is a complex task and information about the quality of schools is an ‘expensive’ good – hard to find and hard to interpret.”³⁶

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.³⁷ 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.”³⁸ Moreover, social networks are important and useful “because they are inexpensive ways to link individuals to reliable sources of information, screen out mere noise, help people evaluate information they have received, [and] help people predict how a program will affect them.”³⁹ Access to social networks may depend heavily on socio-economic status, however. That being said, Schneider and his colleagues believe that, in fact, “the role of networks in disseminating information in markets for public goods has been relatively unexplored.”⁴⁰

³⁵ Godwin, R. Kenneth and Frank R. Kemerer, *School Choice Tradeoffs: Liberty, Equity, and Diversity* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), p. 41.

³⁶ Schneider, Mark, Paul Teske, Christine Roch, and Melissa Marschall, “Networks to Nowhere: Segregation and Stratification in Networks of Information about Schools,” *American Journal of Political Science* 41:4, October 1997, p 1220.

³⁷ Henig, p. 210, op cit 6.

³⁸ Hamilton and Guin, p. 47, op cit 19.

³⁹ Schneider, et al “Networks to Nowhere,” p 1204, op cit 36.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p 1203.

As C-1 parents in the second year of the OSP program continue to gain experience and refine their consumer skills, they emphasized that accurate and comprehensive information is the key to their ability to carefully analyze school choice options and find a good match for their children. C-2 Parents entering the OSP for the first time in the second year of the program were also more cognizant of the importance of comprehensive information than the C-1 parents who entered in the inaugural year of the program. Access to an abundance of information is one of the most consistent issues expressed by parents of elementary, middle and high school students entering both the first and second year of the OSP.

Parents were seeking information on class size; the qualifications of the teachers; the academic atmosphere; academic performance; discipline and safety; and location. A primary source for information was a directory of profiles of participating schools produced by the WSF.

Parent: *In the book, I concentrated on how many teachers held degrees and it was more of looking to see what characteristics and what education the teachers had so that I could impress that upon my daughter.⁴¹*

⁴¹ PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

The majority of the parents felt there was adequate information in the school directory on generic school features such as class size, the number of students, and the background of teachers. Many parents clamored for more information pertaining to student achievement and academic quality. A few parents sought more information concerning fiscal management of the participating schools.

All parents obtained information from a variety of sources, including a school directory and brochure designed and distributed by the WSF; school visits, meetings with principals, teachers and other school personnel; and advising sessions offered by WSF (see Table 2 in Appendix).

Parents had mixed responses regarding the effectiveness of the school directory published by the WSF (described in Appendix A-1). Some parents thought that the

directory was thorough and comprehensive. On the other hand, there were a few parents who asserted that, in retrospect, the school directory did not provide them with the detailed information that they were seeking. One person went further by questioning the accuracy of the information provided by the schools and reported in the directory.

Parent: *The schools I was looking for, [I had problems with finding] the location. I had a problem because of some of the information in the directories, it is not accurate, as in they don't give the right information. And I tried the website. Still what is on the website and when you go to see the school is also different. I try to ask friends, teachers, and others kind of people, but I didn't get the exact information I wanted.*⁴²

During the focus groups, several parents expressed an interest in better understanding how the directory was compiled, and this question was presented to WSF. WSF stated that the directory is based upon a questionnaire that is designed and administered annually by their staff (see Appendix A-2): "Each year we send out a survey to the school asking them for their basic information..."⁴³ This information is synthesized, organized and reported in the school directory, although WSF is not responsible for verifying the accuracy of representations made by the schools before releasing it in the directory. As one of its representatives noted, "we have a whole process about visiting schools and accumulating information about the schools which then feeds back into the information we give to parents... sort of [a] case management system. And so it's not as if we get information from schools and then it's a static process... [I]t's ongoing information from parents, from us feeding back to parents."⁴⁴

Most of the parents said that they obtained sufficient *descriptive* information from WSF sources, but some of them wanted more *evaluative* information about the schools. These parents suggested that comparative test score information would help them to be more informed educational consumers. Some parents noted that they actually requested test score results from the private schools, citing their experiences with reports previously provided by the public schools. A significant number of parents of students across all age ranges would like WSF or perhaps some other independent entity to develop a more

⁴² PSV Focus Group, Parent of Middle School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

⁴³ WSF Interview, Spring, 2006.

⁴⁴ WSF Interview, Spring, 2006.

rigorous system of evaluating the performance of participating schools and reporting it publicly.

Parent: *I think [what] you should do is to put academic performance, [like] maybe the SAT-9, in the directory. Where someone can look up and think that this is a good school or this is not a good school.⁴⁵*

Parent: *They need to evaluate some of those schools.⁴⁶*

For many of these parents, WSF is the entity that should provide this evaluative information. However, WSF has to carefully balance its role as implementer of the OSP between advising parents on the appropriate questions to ask the independent schools and choosing schools for parents. As one WSF representative noted:

I think that our role is more to educate them about what to ask and who to ask than to actually give them the information, because we can't play a subjective role... Often they ask us well, what do you think, what's the good schools? ... What we'll say is that it depends on what your family needs, which is the right school for you... Have you asked this question, did you go to our school visit, did you send your child to the shadow visit, did you ask them what they're teaching and how their kids are doing, did you ask them that if the children take the.... test that the kids in independent schools take?⁴⁷

⁴⁵ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Middle School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

⁴⁶ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Middle School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

⁴⁷ WSF Interview, Spring, 2006.

If school information is not plentiful, comprehensive and accurate, parents may settle into a position between being active, knowledgeable and well informed consumers and simply passively utilizing the opportunity scholarship. An example of the parents settling in this hybrid position is their request for academic evaluations of the private school participating in the OSP. The C-1 parents made the request for academic evaluations for the first time after participating in the program for 1½ years. On one hand, the request for the evaluations shows that the parents seek more resources and information to make their choice and helps them exercise their new found consumer skills. On the other hand, reliance on the evaluations performed by an independent entity may take the place of parents making school visits, interacting with private school teachers and administrators, consulting other parents and carefully considering the attributes of the schools. If the parents are in this hybrid position between engaging as active and knowledgeable

consumers and being more passive recipients of the scholarship, we can predict that in the third year of the program that parents will demand more sources of information and visit more schools, but still rely extensively on the representations of the participating schools and the WSF directory.

The vast majority of parents collected multiple sources of information to make their school choice. How parents processed the information suggested they were refining their consumer skills. This was particularly true for the parents who utilized the school visit process to carefully contemplate their school choice. The overwhelming majority of parents of elementary, middle and high school students, including the Hispanic parents, reported visiting an average of three schools in the first year of the program. Similarly the majority of families who initially applied to the OSP during the second year of the program reported making three school visits.

Almost all families planning to transfer their child to a different private school after one year in the program averaged more than three school visits, especially if the child was in elementary school. The majority of parents who were disappointed with their initial school choice apparently sought to make a better-informed choice the second time around.

One of the most powerful forces guiding OSP parents in their choice of schools is word-of-mouth, reinforcing the importance of social networks to school choice.

Parent: *Word of mouth.....word of mouth, I have a friend who's children have gone there before and they let me know certain things.*⁴⁸

Many parents were divided on the issue of student involvement in the selection process. At both the high school and middle school level, several parents stated that they involved their children in making the school choice,⁴⁹ a message that was confirmed by several members of the student focus groups.

Parent: *They're the one who is going to school. They're not going to that school if they don't want [to be] in that school. Especially when [they] are in middle school, they have to make those choices because middle school is the toughest level.*⁵⁰

⁴⁸ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Elementary School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

⁴⁹ PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

⁵⁰ PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

On the other hand, a few high school parents indicated that their children did not have any input on the decision where they were going to school.

Parent: *Not at all. [STUDENT A] thought that this was my way of punishing her, sending her to a Catholic school that she had to wear a uniform. And she thanks me every day for it.*⁵¹

Summary

For many OSP parents, becoming a consumer of education may give them previously unattainable market power - "people who once thought themselves victims of the system suddenly become owners of their school."⁵² This process - the emergence of a consumer identity - also serves to dismantle historically negative images of low-income, government supported families. For instance, "it has been suggested that welfare programs have reduced individuals' incentives to acquire the human capital necessary to avoid poverty and may even have led to irresponsible parenting decisions."⁵³ In stark contrast, when parents are well-informed consumers of education, their actions produce human capital for their children that could generate the impetus to rise out of poverty.

The importance of reliable, easily accessible and abundant information is one of the most consistent issues expressed by all parents. Parents indicated that accurate information was crucial for them to find a good match for their children. In many cases, the parent expectations are directly related to the quality and quantity of information made available in the directory and the visitation process. Representations made to parents about a school by principals, administrative staff, and teachers are important to the school choice process. However, the accuracy of the information cannot be verified until weeks or months after a child has enrolled in the school. And private schools employ a variety of standardized tests, the results of which can be difficult for parents to interpret.⁵⁴

The reflections of OSP parents and WSF staff point towards another important finding regarding how these parents choose schools. Many OSP parents are requesting school information that is the product of the evaluative judgments of others - or at least involve

⁵¹ PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

⁵² Finn, Jr., Chester E., Bruno Manno, and Greg Vanourek, "Beyond the Schoolhouse Door: Building Communities," chapter 10 in their *Charter Schools in Action* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p 229

⁵³ Besley, Timothy and Stephen Coate, "Workfare versus Welfare: Incentive Arguments for Work Requirements in Poverty-Alleviation Programs," *The American Economic Review*, 82:1 (March 1992), p 250.

⁵⁴ Van Dunk, Emily and Anneliese M. Dickman, *School Choice and the Question of Accountability: The Milwaukee Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

objective evaluative data compiled by professionals on the WSF staff or elsewhere. They think that such information will help them to make better or at least easier school choices for their children. The WSF process for assisting families with school placements is modeled after the case-management system common in government support programs. That may be a model with which many OSP families are familiar with; however, it represents a major departure from the consumer assertiveness that is central to the rational actor model of market behavior.

Perhaps the most striking observation stems from what the parents did not mention in the focus groups. A few parents relied on information obtained by “word of mouth” from a trusted confidant and they indicated it was a highly valued source of information. However, less than a handful of families across both cohorts mentioned they consulted someone whose child had attended or attends a particular school of interest. This strongly suggests that the vast majority of OSP parents are currently not connected to the formal or informal “social networks” that often provide information about teacher quality and other school features that cannot be found in school directories and other generic sources, and that more affluent parents often avail themselves of when exercising school choice.⁵⁵

Section I Summary

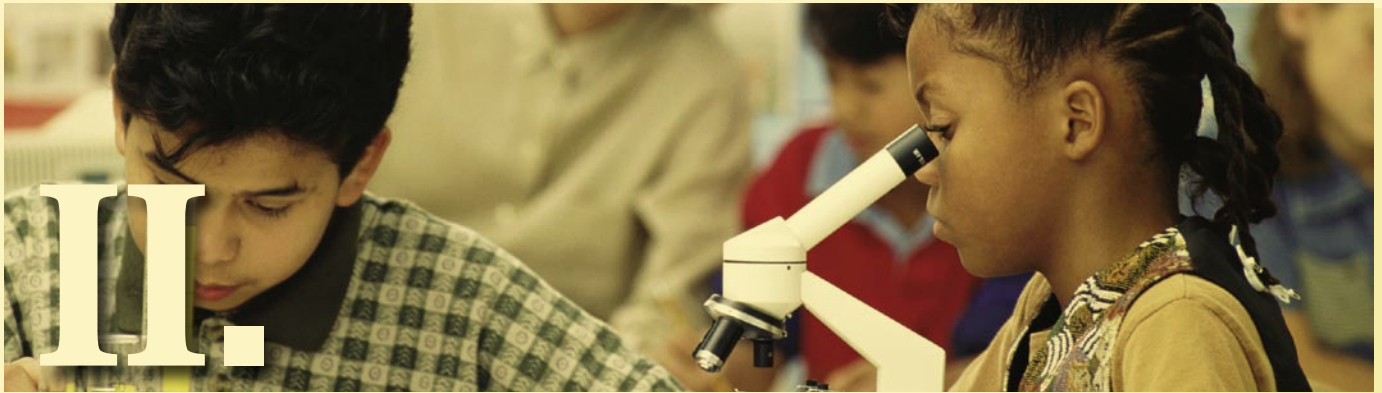
What we have found in our second year of hosting semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with parents and students in the OSP is a group of financially under resourced urban families in various stages of transition from passive recipients of educational services to more active, though not always fully satisfied, educational consumers. The OSP fundamentally requires or challenges parents to be more active participants in the school choice process. On one end of the continuum, some OSP parents jumped into the educational marketplace immediately with both feet, visiting multiple schools, asking many questions, and placing regular demands on the schools that they chose for their children. Many of these parents had prior experience choosing schools. A number of parents have become more involved in their child’s school, either as a result

⁵⁵ Schneider et al, *Networks to Nowhere...*, op cit 21.

of school requirements or personal preference, and some parents are demanding more information from WSF about the schools and the overall program -- requests that indicate a possible increased understanding of the power of information.

On the other end of the continuum, though recognizing the OSP demands of them greater consumer behavior both before and after they choose their child's school, many parents appeared to be passive regarding the school search process and involvement with the independent school. They only consider a relatively small number of schools and forgo school visits or only consider and visit the private school closest to them before choosing a school for their child. Some are resistant to requirements of parent involvement in the school. They defer accountability to others, often recommending that the WSF provide more oversight and quality control of the schools in the Program so that all of them are good and parents couldn't possibly choose a bad school for their child.

On balance, the C-1 parents are acting as knowledgeable and informed school choice consumers. The behavior of C-2 parents in choosing schools appears to be consistent with the actions of C-1 parents in the inaugural year of the OSP, though the C-2 parents seem to be more knowledgeable about the use of information than the C-1 parents in the first year of the OSP.



What Opportunities or Challenges have the Families Experienced in Their New Schools?

By the second year of the OSP, the C-1 parents have developed significant consumer skills in exercising school choice. An important research question is: What opportunities or challenges have the families experienced in their new schools?

The first sub-question is: What adjustments have the families made to their new reality? A related question is: How do C-1 parents evaluate the school choice decisions that they made in both the first and second year of the OSP?

The second sub-question is: What support or resources do families need to meet the demands associated with their new schools?

The majority of data for this section is gleaned from parents and students in the C-1 cohort. There is some data from the C-2 cohort in the “How do Parents and Students Adjust to New Challenges?” subsection.

A. Do Parents' Consumer Choice Skills play a Role in Meeting their Expectations?

For parents who previously sent their children to neighborhood public schools, the new environment of private schools can represent a significant change. In one of the most comprehensive evaluations of inner-city school choice programs to date, Howell and his colleagues found that the parents of students who used scholarships to switch from public to private schools reported that their new schools were somewhat less likely to have a cafeteria, library, nurse's office, counselors, and special programs for non-English speakers or students with disabilities. However, the private schools were more likely to offer after-school programs and individual tutors, to enroll far fewer students and provide smaller class sizes than the typical public school.⁵⁶ Private schools are well-known for offering challenging curricula and assigning more nightly homework than public schools.⁵⁷ 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 in the school day.⁵⁸

Here we are considering the specific question of whether or not the "product" of private schooling included the particular "features" that parents thought they were buying by participating in the program. Was the product that they received equivalent to the product that they ordered? We also consider the more general question of overall satisfaction with the school choice.

Families had considerable difficulty finding the perfect match for their children when they chose schools. Meeting parent expectations is a critical component of the family experience in the school choice process.

There were mixed responses regarding whether the OSP program met the parents' expectations. Some parents were content with their school choice and felt that the independent schools met or exceeded their expectations.

⁵⁶ Howell et al, *The Education Gap...*, especially p. 134.

⁵⁷ Wolf, Patrick J. and Daniel S. Hoople, "Looking Inside the Black Box: What School Factors Explain Voucher Gains in Washington, D.C.?" *Peabody Journal of Education*, 81, forthcoming in 2006.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, especially p. 134.

Parent: *We didn't expect the private school to be as good as it is now and we found it much better than we expected. It's a very nice school. It's clean, everything is very much organized, and every time they give him homework they email us that he has this homework. They also send us every program two [or] three weeks ahead - he will do this and they give him a laptop starting 5th grade. It's a wonderful school and much better than we expected.⁵⁹*

Parent: *It was what I got from the school when we went there....I learned from them and also when we went to meet with the principal my expectations that I got from him was they matched the same.⁶⁰*

However, there were a significant amount of parents of children at every age level, including elementary, middle, and high school students who stated that the day-to-day atmosphere of schools was different from what they expected based on the school visit. The imperfect match between parental expectations and the school environment most often revolved around the level of individual attention children received; the academic orientation of the school; and communication issues between teachers, administrators and the parents.

Parent: *When I put my son in (the school) I was expecting it to have more academics going on cause when we went for the orientation they had more academics going on.... When he got into the school it seemed like everything had changed. It wasn't the same as that picture they brought around when they're showing the school. They didn't have a lot of the things they said they were offering to the kids..⁶¹*

Parent: *I expected [SCHOOL] to be a little bit more prestigious.... I guess it seemed like they're more concerned about the school as a whole, which I understand that on a business level, but I expected a little bit more one-on-one involvement in certain situations. I think...each situation could be a little bit more individualized and not just structured on a whole.⁶²*

A few parents indicated that their expectations were not met and that they were feeling “buyer’s remorse”:

Parent: *I feel like I'm in a bad marriage. I feel like I've been deceived.... Maybe my expectations were too high. I did not know of a school with a closed door policy, where you have to make an appointment to come in and sit.*

⁵⁹ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Elementary School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

⁶⁰ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Middle School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

⁶¹ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Elementary School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

⁶² PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

*[It's hard] to be excited about this school, to show up to pick my son up unexpectedly to get told that I can't.... It's just a big disappointment, very disappointing to me. And I really thought I did my research to get into...a good school and I'm very disappointed.*⁶³

⁶³ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Middle School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

⁶⁴ WSF interview, Spring 2006.

⁶⁵ WSF interview, Spring 2006.

⁶⁶ WSF interview, Spring, 2006.

Families whose expectations have not been met by their new private school have the option of transferring, even during the school year, to another school that is also participating in the program. The families that are seeking a transfer are fully utilizing their newly developed consumer skills to more carefully review all written information including the directory and school brochures; visit on average at least three (3) schools, and consult other parents who are familiar with the schools.

A small number of parents participating in focus groups indicated that they were seeking other schools within the OSP program. As one WSF representative noted: "Switching is a big thing, particularly in the first year. It was much harder this year to switch because the schools were full."⁶⁴ Roughly ninety (90) OSP students out of over 1,700 switched schools during the 2005-06 school year.⁶⁵

The consumer skills that C-1 parents developed in the first year of the Program continue to use in the second year, guide their decisions regarding remaining in the same school, transferring to a different school in the OSP, or exiting the program.

Summary

Predictably, some families expressed that they were unhappy with their initial school choice. Some families were frustrated by the fact that they experienced considerable difficulty finding the right school match for their children or the family in general. In fact, one WSF representative noted that: "Very often the complaints (about the program) come from families that have bad matches."⁶⁶ What this means is that parents are not remaining passive after the choice is made - they continue to evaluate their initial school choice with new and unfolding information, recognizing that they still have options. It is important to note that the C-1 parents continue to access their recently developed

consumer choice skills in making decisions to stay in private school, transfer to other schools within the program, or exit the program. These parents know that there are other private schools as well as public charter schools available to them. If a bad school match is like a bad marriage, as one parent suggested, the OSP provides no-fault divorce and the chance for a happier remarriage, subject to one constraint. The lack of available slots, particularly at the high school level, limits the ability of students to transfer to different schools. In rare instances, parents have removed their child from the scholarship program entirely rather than have the student continue in a school that is not meeting expectations. The phenomenon of the unhappy chooser is another chapter of the consumer behavior story – parents are becoming discerning consumers who will actively consider trading up for a more satisfying educational good.

B. How do Parents and Students Adjust to New Challenges?

Based on other school choice programs, families are likely to confront all sorts of challenges as they acclimate to the policy, procedures and other changes implicit in moving to a new school. These challenges are particularly acute when moving from one system of schools to another. In the first year of the previous evaluation of the privately-funded Washington Scholarship Fund program, Patrick Wolf and his colleagues found evidence of adjustment problems for middle and high school students who switched from public to private schools.⁶⁷ Whereas the elementary school children who made such a switch were happier and more comfortable in their new private schools, the older voucher students assigned their new schools lower grades than the members of the public school control group. During the initial year of their private schooling experience, the older voucher students also were less likely to report that they enjoyed school “a lot” or that students got along well with teachers. Nearly 20 percent of the older voucher students were suspended at least once during their first year in private school.

As we noted above, many under-resourced urban parents seek private schooling for their children because they value the more disciplined and orderly environment there.

⁶⁷ Wolf, Patrick J., William G. Howell, and Paul E. Peterson, *School Choice in Washington, DC: An Evaluation After One Year*, Program on Education Policy and Governance, Harvard University, February 2000, PEPG/00-08.

They expect that the higher standards for behavior in private schools will provide better discipline and focus for their children. However, such a transformation, if it occurs, is unlikely to happen overnight or without at least some friction. Moreover, private schools also tend to have higher expectations of parents to be involved in their child's education and manage the educational battle "on the home front," so to speak.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Coleman and Hoffer, op cit 7.

⁶⁹ The importance of parent involvement has been documented by many researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. See for example: Brian, D. J. G. (1994, April). Parental involvement in high schools. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.; Henderson, A. T., & Berla, N. (1994). A new generation of evidence: The family is critical to student achievement. St. Louis, MO: Danforth Foundation and Flint, MI: Mott (C. S.) Foundation.; Olmstead, P. P., & Rubin, R. I. (1983). Linking parent behaviors to child achievement: Four evaluation studies from the parent education follow-through programs. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 8, 317-325.; and Rich, D. (1993).

⁷⁰ Epstein, Joyce L. 1987. "Toward a Theory of Family-School Connections: Teacher Practices and Parent Involvement." In *Social Intervention: Potential and Constraints*, eds. K. Hurrelmann, F. Kaufmann, and F. Losel. New York: De Gruyter, 121-136.

⁷¹ Wells, "African-American Students' View of School Choice..." p. 32, op cit 8.

Research over the last two decades has consistently reported that children of parents who understand the academic development process and who are actively involved in it, do better in schools. Moreover, schools that enroll children of such parents demonstrate greater student academic achievement outcomes as well.⁶⁹ However, there is considerable disagreement about what forms of parent involvement are most important or effective given a family's resources and other mitigating factors. For example, Joyce Epstein argues that there are five essential features of a strong home-school relationship⁷⁰:

1. *Basic obligation of families to create healthy and nurturing home conditions;*
2. *Basic obligations of schools to communicate with families about school practices and programs;*
3. *Volunteer roles for parents which assist teachers and administrators in supporting academics, sports and other activities;*
4. *Family involvement in skill-building and educational enrichment activities at home which support classroom learning; and*
5. *Parent participation in school decision making and governance through school site councils and other organized policy-making and advocacy groups.*

Parents of choice students face additional challenges in helping their children succeed. Amy Stuart Wells reported that the parents of students who initially tried school choice but then returned to neighborhood schools "were frequently involved in the initial choice of a suburban school but less involved in helping their children cope in the new setting."⁷¹ Yet, 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 bring parents who are highly motivated or have specific preferences out of the woodwork and in touch with one another in freely-chosen schools, increasing parental involvement and consequently school performance.⁷² In fact, Schneider and Paul Teske found that “compared with non-choosing parents, choosing parents were 13 percent more likely to participate in the PTA, 12 percent more likely to volunteer, 10 percent more likely to trust their child’s teacher, and were more sociable, as they spoke to twice as many adults about school.”⁷³ In other words, “school choice, far from atomizing citizens or turning them into mere consumers, helps build communities of concerned and engaged parents.”⁷⁴

In this section we draw upon this Epstein model of home-school involvement to highlight some of the major challenges confronting OSP families as they adjust to the private and independent schools their children now attend. Specifically, we will discuss parent involvement in organized groups, student academic development and the scholarship lottery.

We might reasonably expect that the different expectations and requirements in the private school sector 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, that the quality and classroom approaches of teachers in choice schools tend to improve over time, 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.⁷⁵

Sociologist Amy Stuart Wells has written extensively about the adjustment challenges faced by students who switch from inner-city public schools to suburban schools of choice. She points out that low-income students are active participants in their educational environment, at times resisting the change expectations that are placed on them by others.⁷⁶ She noted that students who transferred to a choice school at an earlier age were more likely to embrace the culture of their new school and remain in their suburban school of choice. This may be reinforced by other findings that the institutional autonomy of such

⁷² Schneider et al, *Choosing Schools...*, p. 12, op cit 12.

⁷³ Mark Schnieder and Paul Teske, “School Choice Builds Community,” *The Public Interest* (online), Fall 1997.

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Wolf, Howell, and Peterson, “School Choice in Washington, DC...”, op cit 67; Eric A. Hanushek and Steven G. Rifkin, “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. Neumann et al, *School Instructional Program Coherence: Benefits and Challenges* (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2001).

⁷⁶ Wells, “African-American Students’ View of School Choice...,” p. 26, op cit 8.

[private] schools means “that students and staff in each focus school consider their school special, a unique creation that reflects their efforts and meets their needs.”⁷⁷

The issue of parents banding together in their schools of choice, a reasonable and appealing coping mechanism, poses an interesting dilemma for families new to school choice. As Fuller and his colleagues observe, “many parents in pluralistic America seem to want both assimilation [through high-quality schools] and particularistic forms of socialization [through schools that accommodate their special needs and values].”⁷⁸ To the extent that scholarship parents call attention to the special needs of them and their children, they might risk stigmatization and disrupt the full assimilation of their children into their new school. To the extent that they remain quiet about their family’s special needs, they may prevent the new school from responding to those needs in constructive ways.

The greatest challenge cited by almost all parents of students of all ages, and particularly high school students, was finding the time and energy to be actively involved in their children’s life at school. First, the majority of parents reported that they devoted more time, effort and energy to their children’s individual work when they attend independent schools. Second, parents were requested by the independent schools to participate in the ancillary activities of the schools, such as special events and fundraisers. Several parents noted that their new schools expected or encouraged higher levels of involvement.

Parent: *I [think] the school demands more involvement.⁷⁹*

Parent: *At [high school student’s] school, we get to volunteer. Well, it’s a must that you do four hours of volunteering per month.⁸⁰*

It was striking how involved the parents in the OSP program were with their children’s life experiences. Parents of high school, middle school and elementary students across both cohorts emphatically stated that their parental involvement dramatically increases when their children participate in the OSP program. The majority of parents were willing to make the sacrifice to work with their children on an individual basis. One of our most

⁷⁷ Hill, Paul T., Gail E. Foster, Tamar Gendler, *High Schools with Character*, Santa Monica: CA: RAND, 1990. Preface., p VII

⁷⁸ Fuller et al, p. 13, op cit 5.

⁷⁹ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Elementary School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

⁸⁰ PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

important and predominant findings in the Parent and Student Voices study to date is that the majority of parents interviewed reported that they are more involved in their child's life at school when their children participate in the OSP program.

Parent: *I spent more time helping her with, especially on math, and we're going over different questions with like tests that she may have the next day and things like that.*⁸¹

Parent: *Well I'm more involved. It's about the same level as far as me being involved with my children[s] activities. Anyway, but I'm more involved in, I ask, I tell them how blessed they are to be attending a private school and they should try to do their best, and they're trying to do their best. And I think it's on the level where they understand that they have a good opportunity to make the best out of it.*⁸²

Parent: *We're even challenged...to be more involved and not that we weren't involved before but the level of even our commitment and challenge has gone another level as far as us making sure that the kids got their homework, school on time, and this and that and all because its more the teachers expect you to have these things.*⁸³

This idea of the "challenge to be more involved" may contribute to the change toward consumer behavior seen in parents. In particular, the majority of C-1 parents embraced the challenge to be more involved in the child's life at school. The causal pathway of the behavior change is not clear, so it may be the empowerment of parents from having the chance to select a school and choose how to spend the scholarship, but it may also be a change emanating from the new school environment itself. One notable quote gives one explanation for behavior change.

Parent: *We realize that in order to get something out of something you have got to put something in. And since the curriculum is higher and the educational level is greater than what they were learning in public schools we know that it's going to take a sacrifice.*

The majority of parents attended extracurricular events, volunteered at school functions, and chaperoned school trips. There was considerable debate among parents regarding the additional monetary and volunteer time commitments that the independent schools

⁸¹ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Elementary School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

⁸² PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

⁸³ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Elementary School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

requested. In contrast to finding the time to help their children on an individual basis, parents had a difficult time adjusting their schedules to be active in special events at the schools. Some parents go to the schools regularly; some only fulfill requirements.

A few parents expressed surprise when they were requested to contribute time, money and resources to the private schools. Other parents felt that the volunteer commitments were not much different from the parental involvement that they were accustomed to.

Parent: *It's a requirement but they explained to me why..... if you don't want it to come out your pocket you participate in this fundraiser and they tell you how much the school get for your part.....I don't find the volunteering part being (any more) than what I done on an average anyway.⁸⁴*

One parent pointed out that there are extra costs in public schools, but they are just not of the magnitude of those at her private school.

Parent: *We only need to give voluntary fees and there are some small cases in which the Scholarship does not cover the costs of additional things but I think that also in public schools one has to make additional expenses [although] maybe not so much as in these schools. Because it is a private school, it is assumed everyone has money...⁸⁵*

Parents are experiencing significant challenges regarding participation in organized parent groups at their new private schools. The majority of parents of students of all age levels did not engage in organized parent groups.

Parent: *We don't participate in a formal association but whenever the school calls us for a meeting we are there. Either she goes or I go.⁸⁶*

While the second year parents are more comfortable with their roles as consumers of education, and increased expectations regarding home and school educational activities with their children, they are not readily participating in PTO forums and other organized parent organizations. The pattern of non-involvement in organized groups set by parents in C-1 carried over to C-2. Although scheduling conflicts and work commitments did interfere with their participation, parents also did not appear to be entirely comfortable attending PTO events – an issue that we plan to explore further in the future.

⁸⁴ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Middle School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

⁸⁵ PSV Focus Group, Hispanic Parents, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

⁸⁶ PSV Focus Group, Hispanic Parents, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

Summary

One of our most important and predominant findings in the Parent and Student Voices study to date is that parents in the program seem to be more involved in their child's life at school than when their children entered the OSP program. Parents in both C-1 and C-2 unambiguously demonstrated genuine enthusiasm for their increased involvement with their child's work at school. Similar to acting as knowledgeable and informed consumers on the initial school selection, actively communicating with teachers and administrators, the majority of parents expanded their responsibility and involvement in their child's school experience. The parents' involvement primarily focused on the child's individual school work. The majority of parents also volunteer their time, energy and resources to volunteer activities sponsored by the independent schools. While the parents in the second year of the program continued to apply their developing consumer skills to better communication with teachers and school administrators, their parental involvement stopped short of participation in organized school groups.

C. Has Communication between Parents and Children Improved?

Parents were very enthusiastic about the improved communication skills they perceived in their children since they entered the OSP. In fact, some parents indicated that the nature of their interaction with the child changed.

Parent: *I can really say my interactions with my child and his school changed tremendously. (He) is more focused on what he does.⁸⁷*

Many parents reported their communication revolved around the child's experience in school.

Parent (5): *Now they're more willing to come to me and say first thing when I see them I ask them how was your day at school and they're more likely now to talk about their activities at school and their friends and things whether it's something good or bad.⁸⁸*

⁸⁷ PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

⁸⁸ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Middle School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

D. How satisfied are families with the new school choice program?

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.⁸⁹ 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 charms of the new schools has a tendency to wear off somewhat over time, as parents become more aware of the shortcomings in their schools of choice. Satisfaction with choice schools also may vary by the level of schooling, as Godwin and Kemerer report that students were more likely to dropout of the CEO Horizon program in San Antonio when transitioning from middle to high school.⁹⁰

It is commonly recognized that consumers in all arenas occasionally experience “buyer’s remorse.” The product or service that seemed so appropriate to them at the time of purchase later disappoints. The lovely new house, purchased with great excitement one month, demonstrates roof leaks and electrical problems just a few months later. The “dream car” driven off the lot contentedly one week, turns out to be a lemon the next. Even highly effective markets will produce disappointed customers occasionally, as they provide no absolute guarantees of satisfaction. Well designed and implemented school choice programs should provide proportionately more satisfied customers than poorly designed ones, but any standard of 100 percent satisfaction would be utopian.

In this section we explore parent satisfaction with the OSP, which includes a discussion of program changes. The majority of data for the satisfaction subsection is drawn from the focus groups of the C-1 cohort, and thus reflect satisfaction levels two years into the program.

The vast majority of families participating in this study are satisfied with the OSP in general, and their choice of new schools in particular. Most parents cited changes in their children’s attitudes about learning as the main source of their satisfaction. For example, the parents of middle and high school students in C-1 were very enthusiastic

⁸⁹ For examples see Howell et al, pp. 168-184, op cit 4; John Witte, *The Market Approach to Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁹⁰ Godwin and Kemerer, *School Choice Tradeoffs...*, p. 40, op cit 35.

about the transformation of student's attitudes toward academics and learning they have observed.⁹¹ Parents also indicated that they thought the students' success in the private schools built their self confidence and esteem.⁹²

Parent: *Before...his grades were below average and for the first time he made the honor roll.... He came home he was so proud that he made the honor roll... .. They had the awards ceremony so I wouldn't tell him I was coming.... When he came out he saw (my husband and me) sitting in the first row.... He gave us this big grin; but to see him walk up there and receive that piece of paper, I mean you could see the joy all over him. And of course grandma you know the tears flow cause it just makes you feel so good that this scholarship is helping so many children that was being lost in our DC schools so it's the adjustment has been great.*⁹³

Parent: *When she was first into [SCHOOL] she entered the 3rd grade. She couldn't read that well. She probably was reading on a Kindergarten level. Now she's on her level and her attitude has changed so yeah the whole thing with...the private school it has done a great deal for her.*⁹⁴

Parent: *They are happier. I can see her happier and she has learned much more, even to read and write pretty well.*⁹⁵

The majority of Hispanic parents stated their children are more motivated, focused on what they want, and striving for improved grades.

Parent: *They (classmates) are very disciplined. When they speak on the phone it is only to talk about their homework...*⁹⁶

Parent: *Definitely, they are more motivated. And the classmates from a public school are very different...*⁹⁷

When asked would they return next year (2006-07), approximately ninety percent of the parents interviewed and participating in focus groups indicated that they were certain to remain in the OSP for at least another year, and all of the Hispanic parents reported they will remain in the Program.

Parent: *My child is having the time of his life. The first thing I noticed when my son started going to [school] when I went to pick him up he was not ready to go home.... it is absolutely amazing. I've been working with children in daycare or aftercare for a school system now for 5 years and I have never*

⁹¹ Parent: Before I had to say.... you got homework you have to do homework - oh I don't know - I couldn't understand that and now he comes in and does his homework with no slack. PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

⁹² Parent: Teaching them to believe in themselves. PSV Focus Group, Elementary School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

⁹³ PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

⁹⁴ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Middle School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

⁹⁵ PSV Focus Group, Hispanic Parents, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

⁹⁶ PSV Focus Group, Hispanic Parents Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

⁹⁷ PSV Focus Group, Hispanic Parents Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

seen a system where...you have to pull them off the playground to go home in the evening.... They feel so comfortable around their teachers and administrators they are in no hurry to go home.⁹⁸

Parent: *She's in a school where it's real family oriented. You know that the principal is very much involved, as well as the teachers. And they really do care so I'm happy.... I don't have to worry anymore about someone calling saying she got jumped or things of that nature, so really I'm just happy.⁹⁹*

The Hispanic parents' high level of satisfaction stems primarily from the religious orientation of the schools most of their children attend, followed by reduced class size, quality of teachers and the discipline policy. The Hispanic parents were particularly happy about the way the school gives incentives for good behavior and academic improvement:

Parent: *He's learning in the moral aspect and that's one of the main reasons I chose this program in the Catholic school 'cause he's correcting me. He's saying 'Daddy pray before you eat your dinner'.... He's learning yes you always pray before you eat. That right there let's me know the program's working.¹⁰⁰*

Parent: *Our girl was given an [award] for participation....every day...she is never distracted....and she was so proud and wanting us to congratulate her.¹⁰¹*

Though the general level of parent satisfaction is high, a relatively small number of parents expressed a deep appreciation for the OSP, but were not satisfied with their school choice decision. Based on feedback from a few parents during the focus group discussions, as well as exit interviews with three (3) parents who had children leave the Program, parents expressed several concerns:

Parent: *We'll keep the scholarship but we'll just transfer her from where she is to a different school. She's been in this particular school for 2 years and it seems like she's regressing instead of progressing.¹⁰²*

Parent: *I'm not happy with [SCHOOL] and I have been looking into some charter schools.¹⁰³*

The majority of parents in the focus groups were very satisfied with the work of the OSP administrator-the Washington Scholarship Fund.

⁹⁸ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Elementary School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

⁹⁹ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Middle School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

¹⁰⁰ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Elementary School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

¹⁰¹ PSV Focus Group, Hispanic Parents, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

¹⁰² Elementary School Parent Interview G, Fall, 2005.

¹⁰³ PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

Parent: *I really think WSF has been wonderful. Their communication, their structure of the testing this year was very good. The timeliness was very good. They brought the kids in, they took them out at the time they said they were going to, not like last year. WSF has answered all the questions on the phone, they're very good.*¹⁰⁴

Parent: *I think by me being in the program as long as I've been... I think it has like improved each year you know as far as they, Washington Scholarship has been great. They ask for your input you know after every test session and I think they've improved in every aspect as far as testing. And, any information you need, any help, they will actually provide it and I think they have like little incentive projects for the children sometimes.*¹⁰⁵

Summary

After nearly two years in the OSP, parents by and large remain very satisfied with their experiences. The parents also expressed satisfaction with the reduced class size, a rigorous academic curriculum, strict discipline and religious orientation they found in the independent schools. The parents evaluated the school choice they had made and their satisfaction levels by assessing student attitudes toward learning, their work ethic, and the students' high levels of self-esteem. The OSP retention rate is extremely high in that an extraordinary ninety percent (90%) of the parents who were personally interviewed or participated in focus groups indicated that they would return to the program for at least one more year.

E. Has the OSP Improved Since the Inception of the Program?

The question of how do parents evaluate the choice that they have made depends in part on the nature of improvements to the OSP since the inception of the program. In the inaugural year of the OSP, we reported the parents expressed that several aspects of the OSP could be improved, including finance and reimbursement policies and procedures; communication between parents, teachers and administrators; school and parent

¹⁰⁴ PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

¹⁰⁵ PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

receptivity to participating families; confidentiality and facilities.¹⁰⁶ The parents in C-1 were asked to comment on whether these issues were addressed.

1. Financial Policies and Procedures

The parents' expanding familiarity with the OSP financial policies and procedures has accelerated the development of formidable consumer skills. Many parents were especially pleased with program enhancements that addressed issues regarding finance policies and procedures that were raised by families in 2004-05. As opposed to criticism leveled by parents in the inaugural year, the majority of parents interviewed during the second year praised how financial matters were being managed by WSF and the participating schools.

Parent: *But now all that [the financial issues that were raised last year] has been solved. They give you a week in advance and let you know okay by Friday or Monday you must be in to sign your child's check, so the finance department has really improved.¹⁰⁷*

Parent: *Now we get letters in the mail stating how each dollar was spent for our child and if we have any difference we can voice our opinion.¹⁰⁸*

The majority of second year parents also reported that their communication with school officials concerning financial aspects of the OSP had dramatically improved since their first year in the program.

2. Communication between Parents and School Personnel/WSF

The majority of parents of middle and high school students in C-1 stated that their communication with teachers and administrators regarding non-financial matters also significantly improved since the inaugural year of the program. The C-2 parents were very enthusiastic and appreciative pertaining to the open door policy of teachers and school administrators at some independent schools.

¹⁰⁶ Stewart, Wolf and Cornman, p. 33-37, op cit 25.

¹⁰⁷ PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

¹⁰⁸ PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

Parent: *When they were having problems finding a teacher some nights they weren't getting homework.... [one teacher] got everyone's thoughts and opinions she went to the principal - which I mean we can go to the principal it's not a problem she has an open door policy if you go in the morning or afternoon whenever you catch her. I mean you always see her.... It's just it's a very good school.¹⁰⁹*

Parent: *I actually got a paper about my daughter going to summer school and it was from the scholarship which I was actually shocked and they told me to sign it and say whether or not I did want my daughter to attend summer school. I don't know if the school sent it to the scholarship to say that yeah I did receive that that was something new this year.¹¹⁰*

Many parents in the Hispanic community appreciated the open access to teachers, principals, and school administrators.

Parent: *Every time we want to talk to the teachers or the Principal we can do that. The other teachers were always telling me they had to check whatever they had to do and they give you an appointment for the following week. But you don't want an appointment for so late, you want to talk to them right now.¹¹¹*

A small number of parents indicated that the communication between school officials and parents did not meet their expectations.

Parent: *I wasn't so pleased about the teachers left in the middle of the year and they didn't even send letters home to the parents the children had to come home and talk to the parents... 'Mom Ms. So and So is gone' and I said 'what do you mean she's gone' well 'she's not coming back' well 'who's going to be your teacher?' Then they had someone holding the class for a while then they brought in a new teacher.... I had this rapport with both these people that are now gone and now I have to get to know someone all over again.¹¹²*

WSF offered parent empowerment groups for all scholarship parents, which are distinguished from parent groups organized by the individual schools.¹¹³ The parents who actually participated in the empowerment group expressed appreciation for it.

Parent: *We meet once a month.... all the parents come together and give our opinions and our dislikes. And for those who don't fully understand what*

¹⁰⁹ PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

¹¹⁰ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Middle School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

¹¹¹ PSV Focus Group, Hispanic Parents, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

¹¹² PSV Focus Group, Parent of Middle School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

¹¹³ Parent: Oh my goodness the attendance is tremendous. PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

Parent: We have, it's over 150 people at each given meeting and it's all grades from K thru high school and it's a great meeting. PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

Parent: I don't need their help but some people do I mean but basically it's getting parent's input on majority of finance cause a lot of parents how their money is being spent and they want to know the difference of where their money going.... I guess the meetings are picking up and people are giving their input. Parent of High School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

*their scholarship offers them, those questions are answered. Behavior problem questions are answered. So the parent organization, you know, union is great. I attend every meeting.*¹¹⁴

However there were many parents in the focus groups that were not aware of the empowerment group offered by WSF. Furthermore, many of the parents were not attending the empowerment group because their needs were not being addressed. WSF is considering offering more and smaller parent groups specifically designed to serve their individual interests.

WSF: *I mean we were talking....about doing some things that are more targeted to specific schools... They'll be better attended by that group of families... particularly with some of the independent schools, for instance, we have a lot of kids at [school] and we don't have as many at another independent school. But the issues that independent school families have might be a lot different than the issues that the center city consortium families have. So, you know, issues of how to use additional funding in your scholarship.*¹¹⁵

3. Case Management of Placements and Switchers

The majority of parents indicated that the case management of their children in the school placement process had dramatically improved since the inaugural year of the program. Some OSP families required considerable support and assistance in finding a private school placement. This was confirmed by WSF:

WSF: *We fill out a piece of paper literally for every family and then they are divided up amongst the staff in a case management kind of way so each staff has their families, and we call them regularly. [We] take notes on where they are and if they are not placed; if they say they are going to go to a tour on Friday and then we call them on Tuesday and say did you go to your tour on Friday and if you didn't go then you are not going to have another one until then. So we really hold their hand through the placement process.*¹¹⁶

In the first year of the OSP many parents felt that that the lottery was not held early enough to allow them to have sufficient time to visit schools and make an informed

¹¹⁴ PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

¹¹⁵ WSF interview, Spring, 2006.

¹¹⁶ WSF Interview, Spring, 2006.

decision. In the inaugural year of the program, the lotteries for both grades 6-12 and K-5 were held in June of 2004. In contrast, during the second year of the program, the lottery for grades 6-12 was held on April 15, 2005 and the lottery for grades K-5 was held on May 6, 2005.

When families do not experience what they were expecting, WSF devotes a significant amount of time to helping them find another school:

WSF: *I mean the one thing [we] would say is that...we really do try to work with these families to find a different match. It's not like they are...on their own.*¹¹⁷

4. Confidentiality and Stigma

*One important finding from a study by Amy Stuart Wells is the possibility that transfer students might be singled out as a group and stigmatized at their new schools. Such school practices quite naturally caused the transfer students to feel alienated from their new school environment.*¹¹⁸ *On the other hand, Godwin and Kemerer reported in their study of the San Antonio scholarship program that, "no [scholarship] parents whom we interviewed indicated their child was uncomfortable in the private schools or that their child lacked friends there. In addition, there was no evidence that a teacher had encouraged a family to take a child out of the private school."*¹¹⁹

There was a significant transformation in the perceptions of second year parents' regarding the receptivity of teachers, school officials and other parents with children in independent schools. In stark contrast to the reports in our previous study that several OSP parents and students felt "singled out"¹²⁰, parents in both C-1 and C-2 unanimously reported feeling very comfortable in the second year of the OSP. This change suggests that families in the second year gradually feel more comfortable as their time in the program progresses. This change could also mean that there has been a concerted effort by the participating schools and WSF to preserve confidentiality and extend a warm welcome to OSP families.

¹¹⁷ WSF interview, Spring 2006.

¹¹⁸ Wells, p. 37, op cit 8.

¹¹⁹ Godwin and Kemerer, *School Choice Tradeoffs...*, p. 41, op cit 35.

¹²⁰ Stewart et al , p. 33-35, op cit 25.

Parent: *When we first started I just felt that some of the schools looked at us differently like it was a handout and to me they didn't know what to expect from us. They just treated us different and I guess ya'll acted on that or said something about it 'cause now they treat us just like we're paying.... I think they've really changed.¹²¹*

Parent: *I felt like this was a regular high school. I didn't feel an overabundance of difference (regarding how my child was treated).¹²²*

Notwithstanding the improvements previously mentioned regarding stigmatization and confidentiality, a couple of parents in cohort 1 explicitly stated that confidentiality remained a programmatic concern.

Parent: *I had an incident with one teacher in the 2nd grade where the teacher was saying something about where if you continue to misbehave your mother will lose her scholarship. So I felt like that wasn't right. I think all us are saying we didn't appreciate the principal or the secretary furthering that information to the teachers. I mean cause it really don't make no difference if someone was to find out that I just don't like my child is more so being...singled out.¹³⁸*

As discussed above, the overwhelming majority of parents who were asked replied that program confidentiality was handled well by the OSP school that their child was attending.

F. What other factors impact the families' ability to utilize the Opportunity Scholarship?

During the focus groups and personal interviews, participants were offered opportunities to discuss issues and concerns they believe deserved more attention. In this section, we illuminate some of the most distinct experiences families are having in the OSP. Many of these issues might be considered unintended consequences of the Program. Thus, they shed new light on the systemic constraints, challenges and opportunities associated with this new school choice program. Several issues emerged as dominant concerns for families who are participating in the OSP. For the second year (2005-06) the principal issue is their concern over "earning out" of the program. In addition, the lack of available slots

¹²¹ PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

¹²² PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

at the high school level, siblings not receiving a preference following award of scholarships, and the five year duration of the scholarship are matters of significant concern to OSP participants.

The majority of parents are clearly becoming more knowledgeable and savvy consumers in education as evidenced by descriptions of their lived experiences in the previous two sections. However there are significant systemic constraints and challenges that impact the ability of parents and students to be knowledgeable and informed consumers of school choice. The long-term evolution for the school consumer depends on the ability of the parents to negotiate the systemic constraints and challenges.

1. Earning out

Under the original law, for students continuing in the OSP beyond one year, the household income eligibility threshold rises from 185 percent to 200 percent of the poverty level (\$33,200 for a family of three).¹²³ In July of 2006, the United States Senate Appropriations Committee approved legislation that raised the household income eligibility limit for scholarship renewal from 200 percent of the federal poverty line to 300 percent of the federal poverty line.¹²⁵ Senate bill 3660, section 131 provides that “Notwithstanding any other provision of law, an eligible student who received a scholarship for the 2004-2005 school year or the 2005-2006 school year under the D.C. School Choice Incentive Act of 2003 (title III of division C of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2004, Public Law 108-199), shall be eligible to receive a scholarship for the second or any succeeding year of his or her participation in the program, provided the student comes from a household whose income does not exceed 300 percent of the poverty line.” In December of 2006, Congress amended the DC School Choice Incentive Act to increase the continuing eligibility requirements from 200 percent of the poverty line to 300 percent for families who were already enrolled in the Program as of the 2004-05 or 2005-06 school year.¹²⁶

The Senate Appropriations committee report states that “The Committee is concerned that too many students will lose their scholarships because their household incomes are rising slightly.... The Committee understands that for various reasons, nearly 650 students

¹²³ D.C. School Choice Incentive Act of 2003 (title III of division C of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2004, Public Law 108-199; D.C. Code Sec. 38-1851.01.

¹²⁴ Wolf, et al, p. 3, op cit 2.

¹²⁵ The new limit would apply only to scholarship students who received scholarships in 2004 and 2005, since these are the only students who are being studied for the purposes of the federally mandated evaluation.

¹²⁶ Tax Relief and Health Care Act of 2006, H.R. 6111 § 404. (2006).

*will lose their scholarships over the next 3 years if the 200 percent threshold is not raised.... In most cases, families are 'earning out' of the program by a few hundred dollars. For instance, a parent gets a slight raise, a promotion, or a higher-paying job, or parents that were separated reconcile."*¹²⁷

The dominant issue for families from both cohorts who participated in the OSP during 2005-06 was their concern over "earning out" of the program. A large percentage of parents who participated in focus groups spontaneously brought up the earning out issue without being prompted.¹²⁸ The majority of parents participating in focus groups are well aware that the District of Columbia School Choice Incentive Act of 2003 provides that to be eligible students must have family income at or below 185% of poverty.¹²⁹ The earning out issue was mentioned by parents who were in both the first and second year of the OSP program and spanned across all focus groups—within and across the two cohorts. This strongly suggests, unlike any other single issue, earning out of the program is a pervasive concern.

Parent: *I'm looking at the big picture...I'm not going to keep saying I'm going to depend on this scholarship cause like you said our income could change. If your income changes you know you going to have to pay...you might not be able to send them to school with a kid in college then what do we do we have to get out there and search in these DC public schools for them to help our kids get their education.*¹³⁰

Parent: *Money is a big issue if you make a little bit more cause it's going to put you in a different status as far as your income and it might make a whole lot of parents pay tuition.*¹³¹

Parent: *I know it's a minimum requirement as far as the money you make. I mean like for, when I first applied, I made this amount. It's growing. I like private school and I will do whatever I have to do to keep it there. But what happens just because my income change[s]? I think the requirement is like \$32,000. So if I make thirty-six to me it doesn't mean that I can afford to send my child to private school. It just means that I've got a little bit, two thousand dollars more. But that doesn't mean that I'm going to see it per se, because you know if that goes up, everything in my household going to change. But I don't want to be kicked to the curb just because of a three-thousand dollar change when I know, all know three thousand dollars on your annual income don't mean a whole lot of change"*¹³²

¹²⁷ Senate Appropriations Committee Report, 109-286, Fall, 2006. The report further stated that "As a result, these students will be forced to leave their current, non-public schools and return to public schools. These students will remain in the Federal evaluation's 'treatment' group even though they are no longer being 'treated.' This, along with very limited high school capacity, will jeopardize the Federal evaluation, which will be rendered inconclusive if less than 50 percent of the students in the 'treatment' group are using their scholarships."

¹²⁸ Parents in 5 out of 8 focus groups conducted in the Spring of 2006 initiated the discussion about "earning out" of the program.

¹²⁹ District of Columbia School Choice Incentive Act of 2003, Sec. 313.

¹³⁰ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Elementary School Students, Spring, 2006.

¹³¹ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Elementary School Students, Spring, 2006.

¹³² PSV Focus Group, Parent of Middle School Students, Spring, 2006.

This concern of families appears to be legitimate. In the fall of 2006, sixty-eight (68) families who exceeded the 200 percent threshold were dropped from the Program but remained enrolled in schools in the OSP with the temporary assistance of private funding. WSF reported that the families of one hundred ten (110) students who initially filed for renewal of the scholarship in the 2006-07 school year exceeded the statutory income limitations.¹³³ WSF stated that, “If the law is not changed, in the upcoming renewal for the 2007-08 school year, an additional 100 or more students will be told that they are ineligible to continue in the OSP.”

WSF officials also indicated that the earning out issue is modifying the behavior of the families. WSF cited three major behavior modifications that the OSP parents may engage in to obviate losing the scholarship.

WSF: *It discourages family unity by essentially encouraging families to remain separated or divorced (...) it discourages work... or advancement in work, and it discourages the adoption of foster children.*¹³⁴

2. Dearth of slots at the high school level

A sizeable majority of parents of high school and middle school students indicated that the lack of available slots at the high school level seriously threatens the viability of the OSP program. Although more high school slots were made available during the second year of the OSP program than in the first year, the demand still far outpaces the supply. Among the twenty-six parents interviewed, four parents indicated that one of their children had not re-enrolled in the OSP schools in their second year. The lack of available seats at the high school level was cited as the principal reason that a few families made a premature exit from the program:

Parent: *That's the number one reason is not enough slots.*¹³⁵

Student: *I wouldn't leave the program but next year I would try a different school cause I didn't really have that many choices cause all the schools were filled.*¹³⁶

¹³³ WSF Interview, Fall, 2006.

¹³⁴ WSF Interview, Spring, 2006. WSF stated that “Foster children are, a, household of one, and they automatically qualify because the income that you get as a foster child is below, but... if the family makes more than... the limit, and they adopt the foster child, the foster child is no longer a foster child, you now have to count the whole family income.”

¹³⁵ Decliner Parent Interview A, Fall, 2006.

¹³⁶ Decliner Student Interview A, Fall, 2006.

¹³⁷ Middle School Parent Interview C, Fall, 2006.

¹³⁸ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Middle School Students, Cohort 1, Spring, 2006.

¹³⁹ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Elementary School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

¹⁴⁰ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Elementary School Students Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

One parent able to enroll their child in a private school nonetheless expressed the difficulty in finding available spots in the older grades.

Parent: *I think they need...a lot more high schools that accept scholarships...it's so hard to find anything after the 6th grade.¹³⁷*

3. Sibling preferences following scholarship award

In a theme that was consistent with the reports of parents in the first year Parent and Student Voices report, some parents mentioned that the lottery should permit siblings to be simultaneously awarded scholarships.

Parent: *Well I've had to do some extra explaining to the other two that didn't make it in to let them you know to just encourage them and let them know it wasn't anything personal you know it's just the way you know that program is set up.¹³⁹*

Parent: *Only my youngest son in Kindergarten got chosen, so I had to explain to the other two... it's kind of hard on children. With adults, we roll with the punches. But children look at it like 'big (...) wow what did we do wrong?'¹⁴⁰*

Summary

OSP families seem to be keenly aware of and concerned about the risk of earning out of program eligibility. The issue was raised, spontaneously by parents, in sixty-three (63) percent of the focus group sessions. Parents spoke not only about concern over earning out of the program but also about specific steps they felt they had to take in order to avoid losing their child's scholarship. These steps included turning down job promotions, cutting back on work hours, or forgoing better housing options in more affordable areas immediately surrounding the District of Columbia. These parents were poised to be more entrepreneurial, to fully embrace a consumer mentality and engage in the sorts of activities that held the promise of producing greater upward mobility for their children; but they encountered an obstacle in the form of the earn-out threshold – a common

component of government programs with which participants must manage. They dealt with the challenge of the earn-out threshold in thoroughly “rational” ways. They weighed the short term benefits of a modest job promotion or a bit of overtime pay against the long term cost associated with losing their child’s \$7,500 scholarship, and decided to play it safe and decline the opportunity for career, income or housing advancement. In the terminology of economists, they determined that there would be greater “utility” in remaining below 200 percent of the poverty line than there would be in rising above it.

The systemic constraints of earning out, unavailability of slots at the high school level, and lack of sibling preferences shaped the behavior of parents and students participating in the OSP. If a parent earns out of the program or the lack of available slots at the high school level precludes a student from attending, the parents will not have the opportunity to utilize their newly developed consumer skills to initially choose a school and make subsequent decisions regarding continuing, transferring to another school, or exiting the program.

If the systemic constraint of earning out had not been addressed by the Congress we could have predicted that the parents would have engaged in behavior to retain the scholarship, including turning down job promotions and cutting back on work hours. Furthermore if more high schools do not open their doors to students, the ability of consumers with new found school choice skills to exercise their prerogatives may end prematurely.

G. What support services do OSP families need?

At the 1997 Presidential Summit, former President Clinton “issued a call to provide mentors for the millions of at-risk youth who could benefit from the support a mentor can provide.”¹⁴¹ One-on-one mentoring alone can make a profound difference in the lives of young people. Tirney and Grossman found that “youth felt more competent about their ability to do well in school and received slightly higher grades” as a result of one-on-one mentoring is relevant to keeping minority students engaged and in school.¹⁴² Grossman

¹⁴¹ Fountain, Arbreton, *Contemporary Issues in Mentoring*, 49 (Public/Private Ventures 1998)

¹⁴² Sipe, *Contemporary Issues in Mentoring*, , 12 (Public/Private Ventures 1998).

makes the most interesting observation that “these results were found for both boys and girls and across races.”¹⁴³

The “development of trust” is the catalyst to ensuring that a mentoring relationship is more likely to succeed.¹⁴⁴ Morrow and Styles indicate that successful mentors take the time to learn about the youth’s interests and provide them with options how to spend their time, rather than planning everything with input from the youth.¹⁴⁵ “Three areas are especially important in fostering the development of successful relationships: screening, orientation and training, and support and supervision.¹⁴⁶ Mentoring requires commitment, free time and financial resources to support an active relationship.¹⁴⁷

Most research has focused on one-on-one or school-based academic models and little research has been conducted on programs in other settings, with other goals and relationship structures”¹⁴⁸ “Further studies are needed to help develop benchmarks that can be used to judge whether a program has sufficient structure in place to optimize the development of successful relationships, increasing the likelihood of producing benefits for youth”.¹⁴⁹

Overall, there is a lack of research that seeks to make suggestions as to support systems independent schools could or should implement and evaluate the support systems currently in place. Too few of the studies and articles seek to include the voices of students and parents and ask which support systems that they believe would be or are effective. As yet, there is no agreed upon set of “best practices” to which administrators of independent schools interested in fostering effective support services can turn. In addition, there are not enough resources available to families entering the independent school world that might ease the transition, prepare them to take advantage of the resources available, or help them develop support systems within their schools.

Parents were reluctant to discuss their own needs and ascertaining them was very difficult. Of the parents that did report their needs, many noted difficulties with balancing work and school schedules. For these families, transportation services were viewed as essential in order to make use of the scholarship. This was particularly true

¹⁴³ Sipe, *Contemporary Issues in Mentoring*, 12 (Public/Private Ventures 1998).

¹⁴⁴ Sipe, *Contemporary Issues in Mentoring*, 15 (Public/Private Ventures 1998)

¹⁴⁵ Morrow and Styles, *Building Relationships With Youth in Program Settings: A Study of Big Brother/Big Sisters* (Public/Private Ventures 1995) Morrow and Styles also point out that successful mentors tend to become acquainted with their mentees families. Mentors who have not been that successful tend to have difficulty meeting with youth on a regular and consistent basis, often demanding that youth play an equal role in initiating contact. Sipe states that “Less effective mentors emphasize behavior change over developing a mutual trust and respect in the relationship. Sipe, *Contemporary Issues in Mentoring*, 17 (Public/Private Ventures 1998)

¹⁴⁶ Sipe, *Contemporary Issues in Mentoring*, 17 (Public/Private Ventures 1998)

¹⁴⁷ Sipe, *Contemporary Issues in Mentoring*, 18 (Public/Private Ventures 1998)

¹⁴⁸ Sipe, *Contemporary Issues in Mentoring*, 21 (Public/Private Ventures 1998)

¹⁴⁹ Sipe, *Contemporary Issues in Mentoring*, 14 (Public/Private Ventures 1998)

amongst parents with children in multiple schools, because not all of their children had received a scholarship, or their children attended various grade levels. Transportation issues did not prevent the parents from utilizing the scholarship, but limited the choices available to the family or forced difficult trade-offs between getting to work on time and their child's school attendance:

Parent: *I have to be at work at 7 or 7:30. It's like I'm stuck with keeping them at the school they're at right now. A person [helps me and] her kids go to school-that's the only way I have to get them to school in the morning, if she takes them.¹⁵⁰*

In the first year of the OSP, several parents and students attending high school requested more tutorial and other academic support services. In direct response to their request, WSF partnered with Capital Partners for Education (CPE), which provided support services to all high school aged students that were selected in the second year of the OSP.¹⁵¹

Parent: *Well with me CPE program has been excellent with my daughter. Her mentor is she's great, I mean...if my daughter...has an assignment and sometimes she has even called her and asked her you know on some subjects that's in her field and will help her. She takes her out. I have no problem with it. I think it just really helps her explore a lot of different places, they went to museums. She's very excellent.¹⁵²*

Student: *I used to have a mentor in eighth grade. And she used to help me with everything like on the bus home or when she going to be in school ... somebody who can do something good...who would give me backup like help me with my work or if I [am] writing she can give me something new, like she would give me [an] explanation.¹⁵³*

In personal interviews, several parents cited a need for mentoring programs such as the CPE program and felt these programs would provide positive role models, particularly for young men.

Parent: *If he was in like a Big Brother program, and I know there's a lot of other kids need to be in it too, you can tell they don't have any daddies around, a baby brother program would be so helpful. Like a boys club type thing, that's what he needs.¹⁵⁴*

¹⁵⁰ Elementary School Parent Interview J, Fall, 2005.

¹⁵¹ CPE is a District of Columbia based private scholarship program that focuses exclusively on providing low income families scholarships and comprehensive support services.

¹⁵² PSV Focus Group, Parent of High School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

¹⁵³ High School Student Interview A, Fall, 2005.

¹⁵⁴ Elementary School Parent Interview E, Fall, 2005.

Parent: *[He] has a therapist and a mentor, big brother type, so they come and visit him at school- see how he's doing at school...So he has two, almost three dads almost, role models and positive adult influences.¹⁵⁵*

Many parents of students in the first and second year of the program felt that tutoring provided immeasurable benefits for their children. The students also welcomed the tutoring programs.

Parent: *Her needs have changed as in its more difficult for her 'cause this is her first year The school that she goes to does an excellent job as in making her cope, as in tutoring. The teacher was, you know, 'if you need help we'll help you.'¹⁵⁶*

Student: *It's helping because I always have a C in math or D, but tutoring has helped because I have a B-.¹⁵⁷*

The parents' request for tutoring was especially prevalent among parents of children having difficulty in their new schools.¹⁵⁸ Nearly all of the Hispanic parents stated that their children could use a tutor, namely in the area of English as a Second Language.

Parent: *A lot of the kids in some of these private schools actually need tutoring that the parents can't afford and I'm one of them and I really think that's basically what I need right now for her is some one-on-one attention.¹⁵⁹*

Parent: *Yes we needed one. Also, when he started, he suffered quite a bit because he was here for some time but then we took him to Mexico and when we came back three years later, he had forgotten all the English he had learned before. It was difficult; he had to learn back again.¹⁶⁰*

Some parents expressed concern and confusion pertaining to the availability of tutoring services. Some parents and students were concerned that the only students who are eligible for tutoring services are those who are performing below grade level, and that tutors are not available for students who are attempting to excel above grade level.

Parent: *I talked with, [STUDENT A] is having some problems in math, but her math grade is a B. But I wanted...to see that grade go up. But I went to the counselor at the school and they said that she's not failing.... They were not gonna offer any additional tutoring and all she could give me was the phone number to Sylvan Learning Center, which was an additional huge expense so I didn't. I was not satisfied with that aspect either.¹⁶¹*

¹⁵⁵ Elementary School Parent Interview A, Fall, 2005.

¹⁵⁶ PSV Focus Group, Parent of Elementary School Students, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

¹⁵⁷ Decliner High School Student A, Fall, 2005.

¹⁵⁸ Parent: My concern is she's holding on, but I think at this point especially when it comes to math she needs a tutor. Elementary School Parent Interview F, Fall, 2005.

¹⁵⁹ Elementary School Parent Interview G, Fall, 2005.

¹⁶⁰ PSV Focus Group, Hispanic Parents, Cohort 2, Spring, 2006.

Summary

Parents were unanimous in their belief that tutoring provides immeasurable benefits for their children. One new finding of this set of focus groups is a level of concern expressed by some parents that a disproportionate amount of the resources of participating private schools are allocated to the students who are struggling and entire academic support programs exclude students who are doing well but could do even better.

Section Summary

One of the most positive consequences of the experiences of these families in school choice is that parental involvement dramatically increased when their children participated in the choice program. Using the Epstein model as a framework for thinking about and assessing the relationship between OSP parents and participating schools, there appears to be relatively high levels of family involvement in three of five areas (1, 2, and 4); all of which are focused on home and out of school activities. On the other hand, parents have expressed low levels of involvement in two of the five areas (3 and 5), which focus primarily on school based involvement. Moreover, most OSP families participating in this study appear to be in need of opportunities to interact with other parents.

The C-1 parents continue to access their recently developed consumer choice skills in making decisions to stay in private school; or transfer to other schools within the program; or exit the program. C-1 parents evaluated the school choice they had made by assessing student attitudes toward learning, their work ethic, and the students' high levels of self-esteem. As part of that evaluation, the C-1 parents also embraced improvements that they have observed in the program, especially in the areas of sound financial policies and procedures; better communication between parents and teachers and administrators; effective confidentiality policies, and protection against stigmatization.

After nearly two years in the OSP, parents by and large remain very satisfied with their experiences. The fact that ninety percent of the parents interviewed and participating in focus groups indicated that they would remain in the OSP for at least another year

demonstrates the success of the program. Even the parents who indicated that they are unhappy with the school that their child was in, a clear minority in the group of focus group participants, were satisfied with WSF's implementation of the program and set of support systems.

Conclusion

Two years into our qualitative study of the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program we already see indicators of incremental changes in the Program and its participants. Based on the responses of parents that entered the OSP in both 2004 and 2005, Program implementation was smoother in the second year. Specifically, parents reported that information and procedures regarding the financial aspects of their child's scholarship had more clarity, a more effective school placement (and re-placement) process, smoother testing events, and fewer incidents of stigmatization of OSP students or parents. In personal interviews and focus group discussions, OSP parents tended to report increased involvement with their child's education and overall satisfaction with the Program. Parental involvement centered on educational activities specific to their child and volunteer work within the school. Parents of the OSP reported little involvement in formal parent-school organizations.

Parental concerns about the Program are generally focused on circumstances that could or do limit their ability to be effective in their roles as new education consumers. Their dominant concern was that positive economic developments in their lives, such as a pay-raise or new job, would perversely result in the loss of their child's scholarship. These parents will be delighted to hear that Congress already has acted to reduce the risk of families earning out of Program eligibility. Parents also expressed concerns about the accuracy of, and the lack of evaluative information about, participating schools. The parents of middle and high school students are worried about the limited supply of school seats at the higher grade levels. These new education consumers are concerned about their ability to be fully-informed consumers with a variety of schooling options to choose from for their children. These programmatic concerns of parents are entirely

rational and could, if not successfully addressed, limit the length and quality of their participation in the OSP. Thus, our current read on the parent and student voices on the Opportunity Scholarship Program is general satisfaction regarding their present experience in the Program mixed with both optimism and concern for the length and nature of their future participation.

In the course of our ongoing dialogue with OSP parents, we perceive distinct patterns in their behaviors vis-à-vis the Program. Much of their behavior is consistent with the model of active and informed educational consumers making new educational reality happen for their children. Some of their attitudes and behavior better fit the model of passive clients, seeking assistance from authoritative sources. It is the combination of consumer and client behaviors that appears to be central to the story of how families are experiencing the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program.

As both the OSP and our qualitative evaluation continue, we will more closely explore the extent to which the experiences of new consumers in the District's evolving educational marketplace are typified by buyer's remorse or customer satisfaction. We will also monitor parental reports regarding changes in the degree and nature of their involvement in their relatively new school communities.



Appendices

APPENDIX A

Table 1 – Significant school characteristics by family segments

School characteristic	Segment of families	Family Voices
Class size	All families	<p>[For] my daughter I was looking for a smaller academic environment because...she'll get led astray easy. She won't focus on her work if she [has] a lot of people around her making...noise</p> <p>I was looking for smaller class sizes and the background of the teachers that they had in the school.</p> <p>I was looking for smaller classroom settings so they have better management over the classroom.</p>
International or global focus	Small number across most segments	<p>The one that I'm looking for them is international school.</p> <p>She wants to learn to speak different languages and they provide French and Spanish so she'll be able to improve her Spanish and learn French.</p>
Location	Small number, mainly in areas of the city with limited access to public transportation	<p>Location as far as the distance and not wanting to be traveling So the schools I was looking for is where my other children go to.</p> <p>I was looking for location because the school they go to is only like 15 minutes away.</p>
Rigorous academics	Most families, particularly families with middle and high school age students	<p>In the public school she wasn't challenged enough. It's like when she get the A's it's like she said 'this easy stuff' and you know she didn't really have to study but now to get those A's, she still gets A's, she [has] to actually study. And it's a little more challenging, that's what she needs. Also, my son in the 4th grade...he was just bored, because he said 'this is easy work' and now it's more challenging for both of them.</p> <p>She feels more pressure now since she's in high school. In middle school she studied too, but now it's just more challenging for her.</p> <p>The more challenging thing was to get her to realize that this [is] a more structured class and they actually care about you doing your homework. So it was more of a challenge -- was discipline and to stay in line and [to have] teachers staying on her and being involved (...)</p>
Religion or values based curriculum	Small number, mostly Hispanics and older African Americans	<p>The characteristics I like about the school my son attends is that they say a prayer every morning and when they take him to church.</p> <p>For us, that we are Catholics it is extremely important (Religion).... Now my daughter writes every day about the Ten Commandments. And she tells my grandchildren not to throw away food because there are so many kids that are starving.</p>
Safety	All families, particularly those with children in middle and high school	<p>When they fight at school, the principal and the teachers take time out to talk to them and listen and see who started it and get down to the end of it...she takes time out with them on a Saturday and they have to come to the school and clean the school up. That's the discipline act for fighting and if they keep it up then she'll suspend them.</p> <p>When I went to apply I already know about the discipline rules the demerits..... from the principal basically. In the meeting he told everybody everything that wasn't on and was on what he would and would not tolerate at the school.</p>

Table 2 – Information Sources by Family Segments

Information sources	Segment of families	Family Voices
School Directory and brochure	All families	<p>The information is right there...what they have from down to the cafeteria to the education, the certification of the teachers, all of their qualifications, how many kids are supposed to be in the classroom, everything -- it's in the book.</p> <p>I think (the directory) has enough information for you. Now it's a little better because it has a map and I think maps are helpful to tell you how to get to different schools. I think that most of the information in that book was enough for me to open my interest in that school.... make the next step to pick up the phone and set up the appointment and if there was a question that I needed answer...I could call and speak with the right person to contact. I think it served a lot of basic information.</p> <p>I thought that booklet that the scholarship fund had was just excellent..... They had the breakdown of the locations of the schools, how many students are in the schools, if it's a religious focused school or not, and the teachers' educational background. I thought that was just excellent.</p>
School Visits	All families	<p>Actually I think the most useful was the school visit. For me it was the school visit because you can read... you know people can always make things sound so good on paper but to actually go there and view...the students was the best for me. Seeing how the teachers and the students interact with one another, even [how] the dean and the principals of the schools...interact with the children and talking to the parents.</p> <p>I went to several schools, more than five, because I was looking for a correct school for my son, that's the only reason I've been to so many schools.</p> <p>I visited two schools and the dean of [SCHOOL] was really accommodating, the staff was very nice and the school was a calm quiet school so it was a calm spirit in that school so I felt like that was good.</p>
Student Input	A small number of families of middle or high school students	<p>That was her choice because she got accepted at [SCHOOL] and her friend went there. I remember and I thought it was actually very mature of her because [SCHOOL] really, really wanted her to come there and she said 'Mommy, I want to go to [SCHOOL] because I don't know anybody. So it was 100 percent her choice.</p> <p>She participated 100 percent too because I took her with me when I went to visit the schools and she would walk through the school, through all the classrooms, and looked around and you know saw how the school was. She made her selection herself.</p>
Test results	A very small number of families	<p>That's one thing I was looking for and I asked the open houses and the students about, was the testing results. For DC public schools there's a booklet where you can get the results of each school's Stanford-9 results to see.</p> <p>For Catholic schools, I was told that this testing that they do for Catholic schools, I don't know how they compare with other schools...or other religious schools, the seven day Adventist schools, how do these private schools test their students and how do their students [perform compared] with some of the other schools?</p>
Word of Mouth	A very small number of families	<p>Word of mouth.....word of mouth, I have a friend whose children have gone there before and they let me know certain things.</p>

APPENDIX B

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A. Research Approach

1. General overview

In an attempt to expand our knowledge about the impact of the OSP on the participating families, the SCDP proposed complementing the government-funded quantitative analysis with a qualitative study. *Parent and Student Voices on the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program* seeks to provide an extremely rare view of the implementation and impact of a publicly funded school voucher program from the vantage point of the participants. The primary goal of this ongoing study is to chronicle the experiences of families participating in the Program. These families include those who entered the program in its inaugural year, as well as those who entered the Program in its second year (the year in which it reached full capacity). In addition to gaining insight to how families are affected by the Program, the study also allows families the opportunity to provide recommendations about critical features of the OSP.

This qualitative study focuses on about 110 families, representing approximately 180 students that were awarded scholarships through the OSP. Sixty of these families began the program in its inaugural year (Cohort 1) and the other 50 began the program in its second year (Cohort 2). In the first year of the study, we conducted focus group sessions with Cohort 1 families in the fall of 2004 and the spring of 2005. In the second year, we conducted personal interviews with Cohort 1 families in the fall of 2005 and focus groups with Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 families in the spring of 2006. The decision was made to switch the fall 2005 method of communication from focus groups to personal interviews based on a recommendation made response to our report *Parent and Student Voices on the first year of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program* as well as the desire to encourage more personal comments. Whereas focus groups create a dynamic atmosphere in which participants can play off one another's comments, personal interviews encourage participants to share more intimate experiences and opinions. Thus, we invited our original Cohort 1 families, consisting of families with (1) elementary, (2) middle and (3) high school age students, as well as a special group for (4) Spanish speaking families, to participate in personal, one-on-one interviews.

In the spring of 2006, we returned to a focus group method of communication and invited Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 families to participate in separate focus group sessions. Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 families were broken down into (1) elementary, (2) middle, (3) high school and (4) Spanish speaking focus groups. Whereas Cohort 1 families were fairly evenly distributed amongst the four groups, Cohort 2 families had fewer high school families. The lower number of high school families was a direct result of having limited the sample size to only high school families jointly participating in both the OSP and Capital Partners for Education (CPE) tutoring service (see Outreach to Parents below).

Table 1 shows the number and type of participants who were invited and who attended each interview and focus group session. Table 2 shows the number and grade level of students who participated in each interview and focus group.

**Table 1.
Number and Type of Participants per Parent Interviews and Focus Groups**

COHORT 1						
	Fall 2005 (interviews)			Spring 2006 (focus groups)		
	Invited	Total Participants*	Participation rate**	Invited	Total Participants	Participation rate**
Hispanic	12	3	25%	12	5	41.7%
Elementary School	16	10 [†]	62.5%	18	11	61%
Middle School	17	6 [†]	32.3%	17	8	47.1%
High School	16	3 [†]	18.8%	14	8	57.1%
Exit	1	3 [†]			1‡ (dual HSP/Exit)	
Total Families***	62	20		61	33	
COHORT 2						
	Fall 2005			Spring 2006		
COHORT 2	Invited	Total Participants*	Participation rate**	Invited	Total Participants*	Participation rate**
Hispanic	NA	NA	NA	13	6	46.2%
Elementary School	NA	NA	NA	15	7	46.7%
Middle School	NA	NA	NA	15	9	60%
High School	NA	NA	NA	7	3	42.9%
Exit						
Total Families***				50	25	

* When two parents were present representing children from the same family, the parents were jointly counted as one participant. Total participants double counts parents who had students in more than one school level within the OSP (For example, a parent with both an elementary school child and a middle school child is counted in both groups).

** Participation rate equals total participants divided by the sum of original invites plus add-ons.

*** The "Total" reflects the total number of families who participated in interviews or focus groups. Unlike the "total participants," it DOES NOT double count families with more than one student in the program.

† As opposed to the focus groups in which parents were assigned to specific grade levels and asked to speak only about their OSP student(s) who was in the specific focus group category, the personal interviews allowed parents the opportunity to talk about all their children participating in the OSP. Two families had students in both elementary and middle school, one family had students in both elementary and high school, and two families had students in elementary school as well as another student exiting the program. Researchers distinguished parents' student-specific comments and labeled them according to the category of the student to which the comment pertained. Because some parents spoke of multiple students, these parents are counted twice in the participant column. Although only 18 parents participated in the personal interviews, a total of 23 grade-level specific interviews were analyzed.

‡ The one exit interview was conducted with a parent who had both a high school student in the OSP, as well as another student who exited the OSP.

Table 2.
Grade Level of Participants per Student Focus Group

	Fall 2005	Spring 2006
	COHORT 1	
Middle School	1	11
High School	3	7
Exit	1	
Total	5	18
	Fall 2005	Spring 2006
Middle School	NA	14
High School	NA	2
Exit	NA	1
Total		17

The numbers and percentages of each group of parents who were invited and who participated in interviews and focus groups in the fall of 2005 and spring of 2006 are displayed above in *Table 1*. *Table 2* shows the numbers and grade level of students who participated in interviews and focus groups. Participation rates in the fall interviews were lower than anticipated. This may have been due to the busy time of year, the cold weather, or simply a lack of desire to participate. In the spring focus groups, participation rates for both cohorts averaged close to 50 percent. Cohort 2 had the greatest level of participation from middle school families and the lowest level of participation from high school families. Cohort 1 had the greatest level of participation from high school families and the lowest level of participation from Hispanic families.

Figures 1 and 2 show the locational distribution by ward of families who attended each of the interview and focus group sessions.

Figure 1. Cohort 1 Fall 2005 Interview Participation by Ward

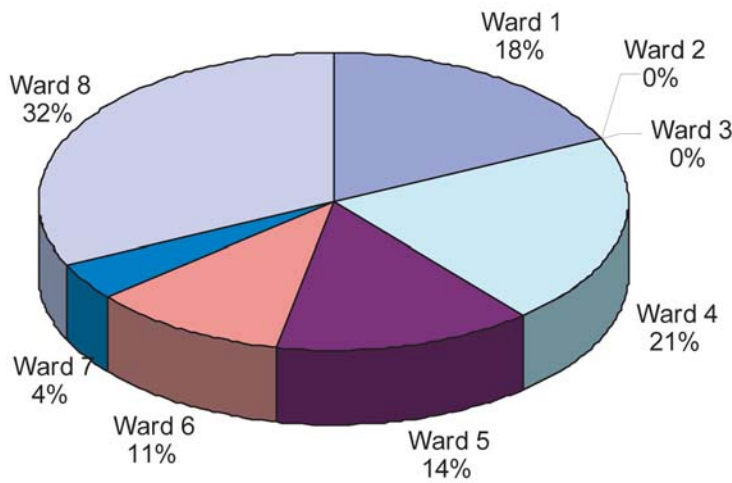
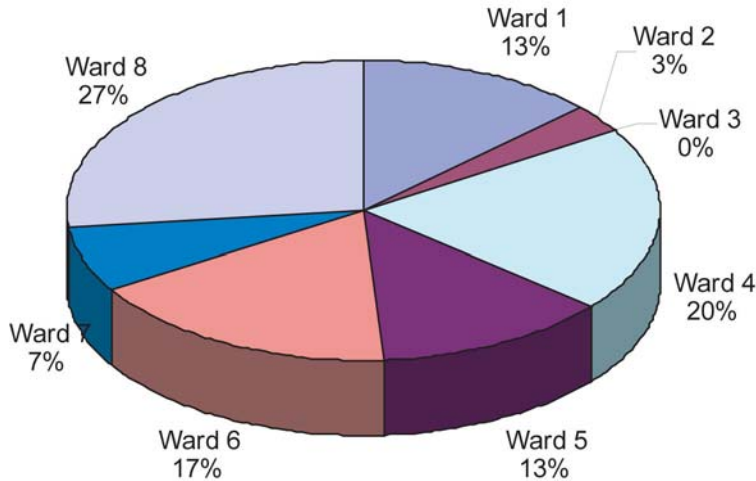


Figure 2. Cohort 1 Spring 2006 Focus Group Participation by Ward



Cohort 1 participants came primarily from Wards 4 and 8, as well as Wards 1, 5, and 6. Few to no participants came from Wards 2, 3, or 7.

In addition to the conversation with the students and parents, we conducted a personal interview with several staff members from the Washington Scholarship Fund. We used this interview to solicit information from an administrative perspective. This information allowed us to verify and validate many of the responses made by the families and to seek more information about the issues and problems faced by families. For example, we asked the parents what resources or support services could help you be more

successful. We asked the school representatives and staff from WSF, in their opinion, what resources could help the families be more successful.

2. Outreach to parents

Cohort 1 Families

Cohort 1 families began the Opportunity Scholarship Program during its inaugural year, the 2004-2005 academic year. These families were recruited to participate in the Parent and Student Voices study at a mandatory scholarship renewal meeting in the fall of 2004. During the initial renewal meeting in November 2004, members of the SCDP research team were allowed to provide the families an overview of the study and extend them an invitation to participate. It was noted that the study would offer participants a chance to inform other parents, school administrators, policy makers, and individuals who are interested in understanding the effect of a school choice program. The prospective participants were informed about how this aspect of the evaluation differs from the test and survey activities required of them under the official program evaluation, highlighting the fact that it would require an additional time commitment. They were also told that their involvement with the study would be entirely voluntary at all times and that the information they provided would be kept confidential. Moreover, they were told that their decision would have no impact on whether or not their children were able to renew their scholarship or gain admission to a preferred school. Families that expressed an interest in participating in the study were given a short informational form to complete, which requested their names, address and other general contact information, as well as a consent form to participate in research.

A total of 230 families volunteered to participate in the Parent and Student Voices study. Based on the grade level of the students and the primary language spoken within each family, they were placed in one of the four previously mentioned categories. Approximately 60 families were randomly selected from the pool of candidates who specifically volunteered for the Parent and Student Voices study, including roughly 60 parents or other caregivers and 30 students in middle or high school.

Cohort 2 Families

Cohort 2 families began the Opportunity Scholarship Program during its second year, the 2005-2006 academic year. Because the program also reached its full capacity in the second year, no further families will be added to our study. Over the next three years, our study will continue to document the experiences of Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 families.

In year two of the program, we were unable to recruit families at a Program wide meeting such as the renewal meeting used to recruit Cohort 1 families. Thus, we pursued alternative recruitment methods for Cohort 2 families.

High school families from Cohort 2 were recruited separately from middle school, elementary school, and Hispanic families. This distinction was drawn in response to a desire expressed by Cohort 1 families for

additional tutoring services coupled with a corresponding establishment of such tutoring services by Capital Partners for Education (CPE). Beginning in the fall of 2005, CPE offered tutoring services to all Cohort 2 high school students participating in the OSP. In order to determine the effects of entering the program with additional tutoring services as opposed to Cohort 1 high school students who did not have the tutoring service available to them, the Cohort 2 high school group was limited to OSP families whose high school students were participating in the CPE tutoring program. To recruit high school families from this group, two members of the SCDP research team attended a Capital Partners for Education meeting held specifically for OSP families. The SCDP representatives provided the families with the same overview of the study presented to Cohort 1 families and extended them an invitation to participate (See Appendix B for copies of the initial recruitment form and follow up letter sent to CPE families). Of the 12 families present at the CPE meeting, nine volunteered for our study. Because two of the nine families who volunteered to participate were Hispanic and more comfortable with the Spanish language, we invited these two families to participate in our Spanish speaking, as opposed to high school, focus group.

To recruit our Spanish speaking, elementary, and middle school families, we both attended a meeting and sent out a mass mailing. The meeting we attended was the DC Parents for School Choice December empowerment meeting (which also happened to be their holiday party). The DC Parents for School Choice is an organization of parents with students participating in the OSP. At the meeting/holiday party, SCDP representatives presented the customary overview of our study and invited families to participate. Out of about 75 families in attendance at the meeting/holiday party, we received 32 volunteers.

Due in part to the low response received at the meeting, as well as a desire to reach the largest number of families as possible, we decided to invite all Cohort 2 families (whose children first entered the OSP in its second year, the 2005-06 school year) to participate in our study. In order to reach the families of all 797¹ students who entered the OSP in 2005,² we asked the Washington Scholarship Fund to assist us in our efforts. The Washington Scholarship Fund agreed to write a cover letter on our behalf and to send the letter, along with our recruitment letter, survey, and informed consent documents to all Spanish speaking, elementary, and middle school families who first entered the OSP in the 2005-06 school year (see *Appendix C* for the complete mailing content). Out of approximately 700 recruitment letters sent on our behalf by WSF, we received 60 volunteers by the specified return date.³ After combining the 32 meeting volunteers with the 60 mailing volunteers, we randomly selected 15 elementary and 15 middle school families. Because we only received 11 Spanish speaking volunteers, we invited all 11 to participate in our study. The two Spanish speaking high school families from the Capital Partners for Education program brought our total number of Hispanic families to 13.

¹ Although there were a total of 797 students who entered the OSP during its second year, we did not recruit families with only high school students in the Program as we had already selected high school participants.

² Wolf, et al. "Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Second Year Report on Participation." U.S. Department of Education: Institute of Education Sciences. <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/doc/dcchoice-yeartwo.pdf>

³ In addition to the initial 60 volunteers received from our mailing, we received approximately 18 volunteers who responded after the deadline. These volunteers were not included in the randomized sample.

Prior to all focus groups and interview sessions, we contacted the participating families to let them know in advance the date and location of the focus groups or interviews. The meetings were hosted at convenient and central locations. Because the meetings were held on Saturday mornings, food and childcare were provided. Students and parents were given gift certificates as a small token of appreciation for participating.

It should be noted that the participants in this study are not necessarily representative of all District families or even all families participating in the OSP. The families that applied to the Program, especially in the initial year, are likely more motivated to seek an educational alternative for their children than are typical DC parents. Furthermore, the willingness of families to volunteer to participate in our Family Perspectives study may indicate that they differ from typical program participants in any number of ways. Families who volunteered presumably felt that the opportunity to share their insight and experiences with Program Implementers was worth the time and effort it took to attend the focus group sessions. Thus, it is possible that these parents possessed stronger opinions and or experiences, either positive or negative, that they were more involved in and aware of their children's education, or that they were more capable, because of transportation methods or time availability, of attending the focus groups.

Because participants were chosen from a group of volunteers, readers should exercise caution in interpreting the material in this report as being representative of *all* families participating in the Opportunity Scholarship Program. The opinions and experiences expressed here are those of a modest number of volunteer families, and may not reflect the general experiences of families program-wide. Nevertheless, the responses that we chronicle are authentic statements of Program parents, and shed light on how a particular group of families are experiencing our country's first federally sponsored K-12 scholarship program.

3. Conversations with families

Focus groups were conducted with both parents and students and were professionally facilitated using a different set of questions for cohort 1 parents, cohort 1 students, cohort 2 parents, and cohort 2 students. Parent focus groups were divided into four sections representing: 1) parents of elementary school students, 2) parents of middle school students, 3) parents of high school students, and 4) Spanish speaking parents of students of all ages.⁴ Student focus groups were limited to middle school students and high school students because it was felt that the elementary schools students were too young to participate. Students of Spanish speaking parents were able to participate in the English-spoken student focus groups.

At the beginning of each focus group session, participants were assured of their anonymity and were asked to provide candid and open responses to the questions. Group facilitators prompted the discussion with probing questions and encouraged active discussion by all members (see *Appendix D* for a complete schedule of questions). The questions were designed to allow the participants to reflect critical features

⁴ A separate group for Hispanics was added so as to include scholarship families with Spanish speaking parents.

of their experience ranging from how they heard about the OSP to application and school selection processes to their most memorable first year experiences. Facilitators were given the latitude to probe for relevant details associated with the general comments. Focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes interviews approximately 15 to 30 minutes. Both interviews and focus groups were tape recorded and transcribed for accuracy.

4. Data Analysis

During the actual interviews and focus groups, we provided students and parents with opportunities to discuss their experiences leading up to their child(ren)'s involvement in the OSP, their experiences within the program, and their thoughts about the future. Personal interview questions revolved around three general themes, but included questions that allowed families to share more personal, detailed information than they had previously been able to share in the past year's focus groups. At the end of each personal interview, participants were given the opportunity to share any additional information they felt was important to the study. Focus group questions were broad in scope, allowing each participant ample opportunity to contribute to the discussion. As noted above, Cohort 1 families participated in personal interviews in the fall of 2005 and both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 families participated in focus groups in the spring of 2006.

Participants were made aware that each interview and focus group session was being recorded and were assured their anonymity. During the transcription process, all individual names were deleted and replaced by codes. The codes allowed the research team to track the responses of parents over time, as well as identify the frequency with which particular issues and comments occurred. Once transcribed, the research team analyzed each transcript, specifically exposing the salient and varied responses within each group. After each individual researcher completed a cohort and category-specific template of topical responses, they met with a partner, who had independently charted the same focus group transcript, to discuss their observations and consolidate their summaries into a "team chart." Once the "team charts" were completed, the entire research team met to compare and contrast the findings across the two cohorts, as well as across the four parent and two student groups.

The focus groups transcripts were coded utilizing INVIVO software. Codes based on general themes were created. Direct quotations were placed into INVIVO software and searches across cohorts and various age groups were conducted. Emerging themes were identified using the INVIVO search methods.

The text of the report reflects an attempt to provide a descriptive overview of the comments made by the parents and students. When possible, the research team provided a more detailed account of the topics that the respondents were willing to discuss at greater length.

5. External Peer Review

The initial draft of the final report was sent to four outside reviewers for comments. The peer reviewers were selected based on their expertise on the topic of how families experience school choice, and based on the desire for a diversity of views regarding the general desirability of expanding choice. The authors attempted to incorporate most of the peer reviewer suggestions into the final version of the report.

B. Capital Partners for Education Recruitment Material for Cohort 2 High School Families

Script for Capital Partners for Education – November 3, 2005

Capital Partners for Education is currently working with the School Choice Demonstration Project of Georgetown University to hear what families are experiencing in the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program. We would like to ask you and your child to meet with other scholarship families to tell us about your child's current school and how well the Program and Capital Partners' tutoring and mentoring services are serving the needs of you and your child.

Information about the focus groups:

- Will probably take place mid-January
- Would last about an hour and a half
- Food and child care provided
- Participating parents would receive a \$50 American Express gift card
- Participating high school students would receive a \$20 Blockbuster gift card.
- Spanish speaking groups available

Because your confidentiality is important to us, we are calling to get your consent to be contacted by the School Choice Demonstration Project with more information about these groups. Your participation of course is voluntary at all times. Your child will not lose his or her scholarship if you decide not to participate, but many families have found this to be a great opportunity to share their stories and interact with each other. Does this sound like something that you would be interested in?

YES

I do need to make you aware of risks of participating in this project. Your children may feel some stress speaking in a group, however, professionals will be there during the discussions to make sure that everyone is safe and to reduce any risks to your children.

The risks to parents will also be very small. Speaking in a group might be stressful for some, although many have viewed the groups as a chance to share their own ideas and experiences about education. While unlikely, there may some risks that we cannot see in the future. Do you understand all of the risks I just mentioned and still would like to participate in this project?

In the next month, the School Choice Demonstration Project will be calling you with where and when these discussions will take place. If you have any questions in the meantime, please feel free to contact Dan at 202-687-1565.

NO

We thank you for taking the time to hear about this project. If you change your mind or have any further questions please feel free to contact Dan at the School Choice Demonstration Project at 202-687-1565.



Dear Parent/Guardian:

As a family receiving a DC Opportunity Scholarship, you have the opportunity to share your experiences and opinions with the rest of the country. The School Choice Demonstration Project of Georgetown University has received funding from the Annie. E. Casey foundation to gather groups of parents, like yourself, to get a better idea of how choice *actually* works. After all, who knows more about why and how parents choose schools than parents themselves?

In the coming winter, we will hold several focus groups of about 10-12 parents. We will also invite middle and high school students of participating families to join in separate student focus groups. This project is entirely separate from the official evaluation of the Opportunity Scholarship Program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education. *Your participation is entirely voluntary at all times.* Please note that everything said in these focus groups will be *completely confidential*. We will never mention anyone's name in our reports.

Most parents have enjoyed sharing their experiences and have found our focus groups to be a great place to meet other scholarship parents and learn from each other. We recognize that families are very busy. To compensate you for your time and trouble in participating in the project, all families will receive a \$50 American Express gift card for every focus group session they attend. Children who participate in our student focus groups will receive a \$20 Blockbuster gift card. In addition, food and child care will be provided for your convenience.

If you or another family member is interested in participating in one of our focus groups, please complete the enclosed survey and consent form and mail *both* using the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope. Since we have not yet scheduled dates and times for the focus groups, this information is necessary so that our staff may contact you to make arrangements. We will *never* release any personal information to an outside person or organization. Because of limited space, keep in mind that not all parents who volunteer will be asked to participate. If you have any questions, or if you would prefer providing your information over the telephone, please contact Deputy Project Administrator, Dan Hoople, at (202) 687-1565.

Sincerely,

Patrick J. Wolf
Associate Professor
Georgetown University

Khari M. Brown
Executive Director
Capital Partners for Education



C. Recruitment Materials Sent to Cohort 2 K-8 and Hispanic Families⁵

January 17, 2006

Dear Parent/Guardian of an Opportunity Scholarship Student:

A group at Georgetown University is doing a study about how the scholarship program is going for parents, guardians and families. The study is being done separately from WSF, so any experiences or information that you share with them will be kept confidential. The name of the study is “Parent and Student Voices on the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program” and the group doing the study is called the School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP) – if you came to the WSF OSP holiday party they talked about the study there!

WSF is sending this letter to you to introduce you to the Georgetown group and to tell you how important your opinions and experiences are. People around the country who make important decisions about education in the U.S. want to hear from you. Remember that WSF will never see or hear the individual information you give.

This study is completely separate from WSF and your scholarship is not affected by whether or not you decide to join the study! You do not have to participate in the study, it is your choice, and we want you to do what’s most comfortable for you.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Brown
Chief Program Officer

- Georgetown University **wants to hear your voice** and learn about your experience!
- **You will get paid for your time!!**
 - **\$50 American Express gift cards** will be given to the Parents/Guardian of middle and high school students who participate!
 - **\$20 American Express gift cards** will go to middle school students who participate
- This is completely optional and confidential
- You must contact Georgetown University by Monday January 30 to be considered – **limited spaces are available!!!**



January 12, 2006

Dear Family,

The Georgetown University School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP) is an education research center devoted to the non-partisan study of the effects of school choice and is staffed by leading school choice researchers and scholars.

The SCDP is conducting a study of families who participate in the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program. The goal of the focus group study is to shed light on the experiences of families who participate in the Program. This study will record the perceptions of parents and students as they apply for, receive and use an Opportunity Scholarship. This study also offers families an opportunity to make recommendations for improvement. We would like to hear your voice on the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program.

We would like to invite you to be a part of our study by participating in focus groups. The participants will be randomly selected by a lottery. The focus groups are open to parents of elementary school students, parents of middle school students, and middle school students. The parents and students selected will be asked to participate in the focus groups for four years, meeting once in the fall and once in the spring. Focus groups require approximately 90 minutes of your time for each session. Parents and/or guardians who participate in the focus groups will receive a \$50 American Express gift card for each session. Middle school student who participates will receive a \$20 gift card per session. The focus groups are usually held at the Georgetown University Law Center near Union Station on Saturdays. The first round of focus groups will take place in February, 2006.

To learn more about the SCDP and our DC Opportunity Scholarship study, you can view or listen to our report on first year families (released this fall) at: <http://www.georgetown.edu/research/scdp/>

If you would like to volunteer to participate in our study, please:

- 1) Read and sign the informed consent form. Only the last page should be signed and returned to us. The other pages are for your records.
- 2) Fill out the family survey, including your current address and phone number at which we can reach you.
- 3) Enclose the completed survey and signed consent form in the return envelope provided and send it back to the SCDP by January 30th, 2006.

If you have any questions, you can call Rachel (202-687-1562) or Steve (202-687-6323) at the SCDP office. Thank you for your time and we look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Rachel Greszler in cursive.

Rachel Greszler
SCDP Research Assistant

Enclosure



Parent/Guardian Information:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone Number: _____ Email Address: _____

What is your race? (Check one) Black Asian White
 American Indian or Alaskan Native
 Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

Are you Hispanic or Latino? Yes No

What is the *highest* level of education that you have completed?

- Less than high school graduation
- GED or high school equivalency
- High school diploma
- Some college or training, but did not earn a degree or certificate
- Degree or certificate from a 2-year or less than 2-year college/training program
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate (post-Bachelor's) degree

Household and Children Information (*ALL* children in the household):

How many people are living in your household? _____

Child #1

Name: _____ Relationship to Child: _____

Grade: _____ Receiving an Opportunity Scholarship? Yes No

If yes, what type of school was he/she attending prior to the OSP? Public Private Charter

Was it a School In Need of Improvement (SINI)? Yes No I don't know

If no, what type of school is he/she currently attending? Public Private Charter

Is it a School In Need of Improvement (SINI)? Yes No I don't know

On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest), how satisfied are you with your child's current school? _____

Child #2

Name: _____ Relationship to Child: _____

Grade: _____ Receiving an Opportunity Scholarship? Yes No

If yes, what type of school was he/she attending prior to the OSP? Public Private Charter

Was it a School In Need of Improvement (SINI)? Yes No I don't know

If no, what type of school is he/she currently attending? Public Private Charter

Is it a School In Need of Improvement (SINI)? Yes No I don't know

On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest), how satisfied are you with your child's current school? _____

Child #3

Name: _____ Relationship to Child: _____

Grade: _____ Receiving an Opportunity Scholarship? Yes No

If yes, what type of school was he/she attending prior to the OSP? Public Private Charter

Was it a School In Need of Improvement (SINI)? Yes No I don't know

If no, what type of school is he/she currently attending? Public Private Charter

Is it a School In Need of Improvement (SINI)? Yes No I don't know

On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest), how satisfied are you with your child's current school? _____

Child #4

Name: _____ Relationship to Child: _____

Grade: _____ Receiving an Opportunity Scholarship? Yes No

If yes, what type of school was he/she attending prior to the OSP? Public Private Charter

Was it a School In Need of Improvement (SINI)? Yes No I don't know

If no, what type of school is he/she currently attending? Public Private Charter

Is it a School In Need of Improvement (SINI)? Yes No I don't know

On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest), how satisfied are you with your child's current school? _____

Child #5

Name: _____ Relationship to Child: _____

Grade: _____ Receiving an Opportunity Scholarship? Yes No

If yes, what type of school was he/she attending prior to the OSP? Public Private Charter

Was it a School In Need of Improvement (SINI)? Yes No I don't know

If no, what type of school is he/she currently attending? Public Private Charter

Is it a School In Need of Improvement (SINI)? Yes No I don't know

On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest), how satisfied are you with your child's current school? _____

Contact Information:

Please provide the names and contact information of two people who are likely to know of your whereabouts in the future.

The contact people listed do not have to be family members and can be friends and/or neighbors of the family.

Last Name: _____ First Name: _____ Phone number: _____

Address: _____

Last Name: _____ First Name: _____ Phone number: _____

Address: _____

Thank you for taking the time to complete this short survey!

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

PROJECT DIRECTOR

Principal Investigator: Patrick J. Wolf, Ph.D. Georgetown Univ. (202) 687-9152

Co-Investigator: Thomas Stewart, Ph.D. Independent Consultant (410) 342-8797

Project Administrator: Stephen Q. Cornman, Esq. Georgetown Univ. (202) 687-6323

SPONSOR

The sponsor is the Casey Foundation. The Georgetown University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved this research project. For information on the rights of a research subject, call the Institutional Review Board office at 202-687-5594.

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to consider participating in a research study to investigate the experiences of participants in the DC K-12 Scholarship program. This form will describe the purpose and nature of the research, its possible risks and benefits, and your rights as a participant in the study.

WHY IS THIS RESEARCH STUDY BEING DONE?

The purpose of this research project is to capture family experiences, ranging from how parents choose schools to how students adjust to non-public school settings to how community stakeholders view the DC choice program. From the information that you provide, we can get a better idea of what effect parental choice can have on students and their families.

Your children will be asked to participate in focus groups and complete surveys. We may also invite you to join us in a group discussion about your children's experiences in school. These meetings are important to gather information that we need from as many participants as possible. We will also ask you for feedback about the school you select, such as how difficult it was to find and enroll in the school and how well it is serving the needs of your child.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL TAKE PART IN THE STUDY

Approximately 224 people will take part in the study.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THE STUDY

We will ask you to participate in focus groups and/or interviews where we ask you questions about your experience in the DC School Choice Incentive Program. The focus groups will take approximately ninety (90) minutes. The initial wave of focus groups will concentrate on questions about parental experiences with the school search and student adjustment to their new schools. A second wave of focus groups will be conducted in the spring of 2005 that will be more concerned with the effects that the school choice program has had on children and their parents.

HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THE STUDY?

We expect that you will be in the study for one year. The investigators or sponsors may stop the study or take you out of the study at any time they judge it is in your best interest or variety of other reasons. They can do this without your consent.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?

Your children may experience some stress as a result of participating in focus groups or as a result of switching to a different school. However, we will make every effort to prevent study-related harm to your child. Professionals will be there during the focus groups to make sure that the atmosphere is safe and to reduce any risks to your children. And since the focus groups have no impact on the student's grade or their ability to continue to use a scholarship, we expect your child's risks to be minimal. The risks to parents will also be very small. Participation only requires a small time commitment. When parents are also asked to participate in focus groups might be stressful for some, although many view them as a valued opportunity to share their own ideas and experiences about education with other parents and the researchers. While unlikely, there may some risks that we cannot see in the future.

ARE THERE BENEFITS TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?

The study will provide you with the opportunity to share your experiences of the school choice program with other parents and researchers. The information that participants provide will offer the opportunity to discover the effects of an important education policy reform. The study will offer the chance to share those effects with students and families that participate in the school choice program. The study will also inform the broader research, policy making, and education communities. The study will offer a chance to inform policy makers about the likely effects of a broad school choice program.

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE IN THESE STUDIES?

This study is designed for parents and students participating in the DC Scholarship program.

WHAT ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY?

The information that you provide to the researchers will be kept confidential. Your name and the names of your children will remain confidential except as required by law. Every effort will be made to keep your research records and other personal information confidential. However we cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Individuals from the Georgetown University IRB, other Georgetown University offices, and federal regulatory agencies may look at records related to the study, both to assure quality control and to analyze data.

WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?

Adults will be paid \$50 for their participation in one focus group session. Adults who choose to exit the DC School Choice Program and be interviewed will be paid for \$50 for an exit interview. Students will receive a \$10 gift certificate to participate in the focus groups. Payment will be made at the conclusion of the focus groups.

WHAT IF I GET INJURED DURING MY PARTICIPATION

Researchers will make every effort to prevent study related injuries. If you injured while you are in the study, you will receive emergency medical care. The costs of this care will be charged to you or your health insurance. No funds have been made available by Georgetown University or its affiliates, the District of Columbia, or the federal government to compensate you for a study related injury or illness.

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary at all times. You and your school aged children are being asked to participate in the study. Reports evaluating the project will be provided to all families that participate. By signing this form, you agree to participate in the study. After you sign the informed consent form, you may choose to withdraw you or your children at any time during the study. Your decision to participate in the study will have no effect on whether or not your children receive scholarships or gain admission to a preferred school. Please notify a research assistant or Stephen Q. Cornman, project administrator, if you choose to opt-out of the study.

WHOM DO I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

Call Stephen Q. Cornman at (973) 687-6323 if you have questions about the study or any problems.

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

I have fully explained this study to the subject. I have discussed the study’s purpose, its experimental and non-experimental procedures and interventions, the possible risks and benefits, the standards and research aspects of the study, the alternatives to participation, and the voluntary nature of participation. I have invited the subject to ask questions and have answered any questions that the subject has asked.

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

Date

**Permission for Child to Participate in Research/
Subject’s Informed Consent**

I had the opportunity to ask questions regarding the evaluation of the School Choice Demonstration Program. I have read the information provided in this Informed Consent Form (or it was read to me by _____). I consent to participate in the study. As a parent or guardian, I also consent to the children named below to becomes participant(s) in the research study described in this form. I understand that I can remove my children and myself from the study at any time without jeopardizing my child’s opportunity to receive a scholarship. Any questions I had were answered to my satisfaction.

Parent or Guardian Signature

Date

Name of Child

Child’s Date of Birth

Name of Child

Child’s Date of Birth

Name of Child

Child’s Date of Birth

Name of Child

Child’s Date of Birth

Name of Child

Child’s Date of Birth

Name of Child

Child’s Date of Birth

**GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

INTRODUCTION

We are doing a study to learn more about how you feel about the DC K-12 Scholarship Program.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME IN THIS STUDY?

You will be asked get together with a group of 8 or 9 other kids your age to talk about how you feel about your new school. This will happen two times – one time in the fall and one time in the spring. If you decide to leave your new school, we will also ask you to talk how you feel about leaving your new school.

CAN ANYTHING BAD HAPPEN TO ME?

You may feel a little uncomfortable sharing your feelings about school in front of others, but we will do everything we can to make you feel comfortable.

WILL ANYONE KNOW I AM IN THE STUDY?

The fact that you are in this study will be kept a secret from anyone outside the focus group.

WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY?

You will get a \$20 gift certificate for being in this study.

WHAT IF I DO NOT WANT TO DO THIS?

You don't have to be in this study. No one will be mad at you if you don't want to do this. If you don't want to be in this study, you just have to tell us. You can stop answering questions anytime you start to feel uncomfortable. And, remember, you can say "yes" now and change your mind later. It's up to you.

SIGNATURE CLAUSE

Do you understand this study and are you willing to participate?

YES

NO

Signature of Child

Date

Person Obtaining Assent

Date

D. Interview and Focus Group Guides

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 is 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

- Thinking your current housing, employment, and health care situations, which 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)

STUDENT 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 does the student describe their experience? (5 minutes)

Central question

What changes have you notice in your performance in school?

Probing questions

Do you feel you are performing better or worst as a result of attending your new school?

Would prefer staying in the Program or leaving?

Does your parent share your position?

Theme 2: What role does the parent and other adults play in the student's social and academic development? (7 minutes)

Central question

Which adults are having the greatest influence on your academic development?

Probing questions

What makes that/those people special?

Do you feel you could benefit from additional support?

Theme 3: How do high school students perceive and describe the support systems in their lives? (7 minutes)

Central question

What do you need to be more successful with your class work or grades?

Probing questions

Have the student address each of the following three areas:

- School
- Home
- Relationship with friends and peers at home and school

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

EXIT 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, specifically why your family has or is considering leaving the Program.
- Your comments 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. Exit Interview questions (25 MINUTES)

- 1. Why did you decide to leave the OSP?**
- 2. How does your child feel about your decision to leave the OSP?**
- 3. Have you informed the WSF that you left or are leaving the OSP?**
4. To the best of your knowledge, are there other parents who share your reason(s) for leaving?
5. What recommendations would you make to improve the OSP?
6. Would you ever return to the OSP and use a scholarship again for this child?
- 7. Though you are no longer in the Program, we hope you will continue to participate in the study. Are you interested?**
- 8. Is there anything you would like to share that we have not discussed?**

PARENT FOCUS GROUP MODERATOR'S GUIDE
Cohort 2

Saturday, April 1, 2006

I. Greetings (10 minutes)

Greetings. My name is xxx. Thank you for coming to our focus groups on Parent and Student Voices on the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program.

The purpose of this meeting is to learn about your families experiences with OSP. Your open and honest comments about your experiences with the Opportunity Scholarship Program will help to improve it.

I will quickly highlight a few important items about the focus groups:

- We will essentially explore a series of questions your experiences begin with how you first heard about the OSP.
- We encourage you to express your views freely.
- There is no right or wrong answers.
- 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 four 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. All of participant 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.*

Ok, let's get reacquainted by going around the table and introducing ourselves, giving only our first name, the grade your child is currently in, and the type of school they attended before the OSP (public, charter or private independent). I will start, by saying again that my name is _____.

II. Reflecting upon your first year with OSP (30 minutes)

Primary questions:

- What motivated you to apply to the OSP, and how did you find about it?
- What characteristics were you looking for in a new school?
- What information was most helpful during your school search?
- How many schools did you visit?
- How involved was your child in the selection process?

III. Adjusting to the new school environment (25)

Primary questions:

- What has the adjustment process looked like for you and your child?
 - How is the experience different from the school your child previously attended?
- How has your family's needs changed since receiving the scholarship?
- What involvement have you had with any parent organizations?

IV. Parent satisfaction and recommendations (20)

Primary questions:

- Think back to when you were deciding which school you would select, what is the difference between what you expected from the school you choose versus what you have experienced thus far?
- **At this point, do you think your child will remain in the OSP next year?**
 - *How have your thoughts and feelings changed from last year?*
- What support are you receiving? What support would you recommend?

V. Feedback about the study (5 minutes)

I would like to remind you all that our goal is to continue to meet with you all at least once per year for the next three years or until 2008-09 academic school year. As a result, we are interested

in making sure that this is a comfortable and rewarding experience for and your children. We would like to make sure that you prefer the following:

- Best form of communication – telephone and mail?
- Best day of the week - Saturday?
- Best time of day – 10-3?
- Location – Georgetown Law Center?
- **Length of the sessions – 90 minutes?**
- Other suggestions for improving the focus groups?

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 and we look for to hearing more about them next year.

Total Planned Time: 90 minutes

PARENT FOCUS GROUP MODERATOR'S GUIDE
Cohort 1

Saturday, April 22, 2006

I. Greetings (10 minutes)

Greetings. My name is xxx. Thank you for coming out again to our focus groups on Parent and Student Voices on the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program.

The purpose of this meeting is to continue the conversations we started with you all last year. As we mentioned then, your open and honest comments about your experiences with the Opportunity Scholarship Program will help to improve it.

All of you participated in the focus groups last year, so you know how the process works, but I will quickly highlight a few important items:

- We will essentially explore the same questions we discussed with you last year with a few exceptions; I will highlight the new questions in a few minutes.
- We encourage you to express your views freely.
- There is no right or wrong answers.
- 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 four 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. All of participant 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.*

Ok, let's get reacquainted by going around the table and introducing ourselves, giving only our first name, the grade your child is currently in, and the type of school they attended before the OSP (public, charter or private independent). I will start, by saying again that my name is _____.

II. Reflecting upon last year's findings (25 minutes)

Primary questions:

- You all discussed two important issues that we would like to revisit: (1) maintaining your anonymity (2) versus creating an organization that allows you an opportunity to interact with other parents and pursue common points of interest. Which of these two are most important to you and why?
- You all raised several issues with regard to finances; has there been any change?
- How has your communication and interactions with your child changed since enrolling in the OSP?

III. Adjusting to the new school environment (30)

Primary questions:

- What has the adjustment process looked like for you and your child?
 - How is the experience different from the school your child previously attended?
- How has your family's needs changed since receiving the scholarship?
- What involvement have you had with any parent organizations?

IV. Parent satisfaction and recommendations (20)

Primary questions:

- Think back to when you were deciding which school you would select, what is the difference between what you expected from the school you choose versus what you have experienced thus far?
- **At this point, do you think your child will remain in the OSP next year?**
 - *How have your thoughts and feelings changed from last year?*
- What support are you receiving? What support would you recommend?

V. Feedback about the study (5 minutes)

I would like to remind you all that our goal is to continue to meet with you all at least once per year for the next three years or until 2008-09 academic school year. As a result, we are interested in making sure that this is a comfortable and rewarding experience for and your children. We would like to make sure that you prefer the following:

- Best form of communication – telephone and mail?
- Best day of the week - Saturday?
- Best time of day – 10-3?
- Location – Georgetown Law Center?
- **Length of the sessions – 90 minutes?**
- Other suggestions for improving the focus groups?

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 and we look for to hearing more about them next year.

Total Planned Time: 90 minutes

STUDENT FOCUS GROUP MODERATOR'S GUIDE
Cohort 1

Saturday, April 22, 2006

I. Greetings (10 minutes)

Greetings. My name is xxx. Thank you for coming out again to our focus groups on Parent and Student Voices on the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program.

The purpose of this meeting is to continue the conversations we started with you all last year. As we mentioned then, your open and honest comments about your experiences with the Opportunity Scholarship Program will help to improve it.

All of you participated in the focus groups last year, so you know how the process works, but I will quickly highlight a few important items:

- We will essentially talk about the same questions we discussed with you last year with a few exceptions; I will highlight the new questions in a few minutes.
- We encourage you to express your views freely.
- There is no right or wrong answers.
- 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 individual comments.
- **We have divided the questions into four sections with a goal of completing the discussion in about one hour.**
- Ask other team members in the room to introduce themselves.
- Note that they are here to observe and take notes. All of participant 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.***

Ok, let's get reacquainted by going around the table and introducing ourselves, giving only our first name, the grade that you are in, and the type of school you attended before the OSP (public, charter or private independent). I will start, by saying again that my name is _____.

II. Reflecting upon last year's findings (25 minutes)

Primary questions:

- Increased academic workload
- Being singled out by teachers
- Participating in family decision making
- Relationships with peers
- The need for support services

III. Adjusting to the new school (25)

Primary questions:

- What has the adjustment process been like for you and your family?
 - What is the most noticeable difference between your old and new school?
 - How do you think your parents are adjusting?
- What are the differences in your experiences this year compared to last year as they pertain to:
 - Students at your school?
 - Teachers?
 - Parents?
 - Friends in the neighborhood or where you spend most of your after school time?
- What additional support do you think your family could use?

Optional question:

- What is your relationship with students at your school, in general, and other students in the OSP program, in particular?

IV. Student satisfaction and recommendations (15)

Primary questions:

- If you had to give your parent advice about taking you out of or leaving you in your new school, which would recommend?
 - *How have your thoughts and feelings changed from last year?*
 - *How does your position compare to your parents?*
- How do you think the OSP can be improved?

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

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 and we look for to hearing more about them next year.

Total Planned Time: 70 minutes



The Evolution of School Choice Consumers: Parent and Student Voices

About the Authors



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.



Senior Research Associate Dr. Thomas Stewart is a Managing Partner with Symphonic Strategies. 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, and the SEED Public Charter School.



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