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# School choice: What parents choose

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## Introduction

**The educational system in Australia allows parents to have a choice when it comes to selecting a school for their children. Parents have become consumers in an educational market, and schools, including Christian schools, now find themselves operating in a competitive space.**

**The research reported in this two-part article sought to explore the factors that influence parents' choice of school for their children using a mixed methods approach. Parents with students attending Christian schools in an Australian urban environment completed a total of 102 School Choice questionnaires, and 17 families with children in schools were interviewed.**

The analysis of the data generated two separate but interrelated reports. The first article (Beamish & Morey, 2012) investigated what motivates parents in the choice of a school for their children. All too often discussions on school choice are reduced to discussions of parents' preferred collections of isolated school characteristics. This reductionist view is often at the operational level, resulting in educators focusing on a limited set of operational characteristics that are deemed to be important. This serves to limit the school choice discussion. The first article sought to take the discussion to a higher level, to consider what are the main motivational considerations that drive parents choice of school. The data from this study indicated that parents are motivated in their school choice by two main considerations: the aspirations that they have for their children, and the anxieties they hold for them. This result parallels the findings of Campbell, Proctor & Sherington (2009). School choice is therefore

a parental attempt to maximise aspirations and minimise anxieties associated with their children's future. These decisions are made in a competitive market place (English, 2009) where, for example, school data on school performance is made public through websites such as the *My School* website.

Having considered the factors that motivate parents, this component of the study investigates the specific characteristics that parents focus on as they choose a school for their children.

## School choice: Factors and influences

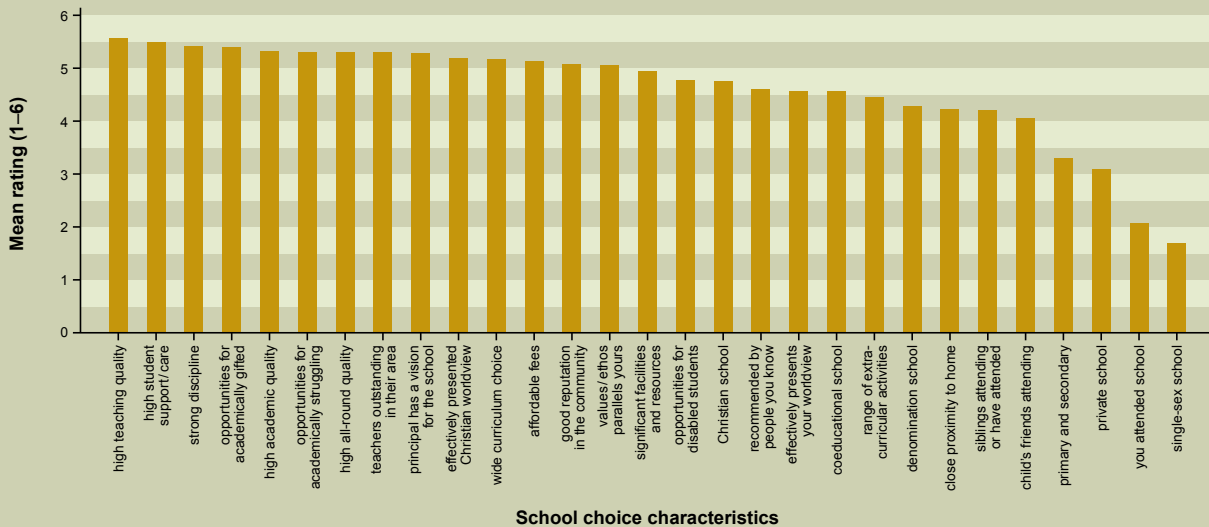
In the School Choice survey parents were asked to rate a series of school related factors in terms of their importance in making school choices for their children. The survey used a scale that ranged from 1 to 6, where 1 indicated not important and 6 indicated extremely important. The survey consisted of 29 different factors ranging from teaching quality to catering for students with special needs, principals' vision to school ethos, and fees to location.

The mean responses (*M*) from the whole group are illustrated in Figure 1 where the factors have been arranged from the highest to the lowest ranking mean, with the highest ranked factor having a mean of 5.59 and the lowest ranked factor receiving a mean of 1.71. All characteristics, except for the last four, scored above 4 on a 1–6 scale, which indicates they are important, very important or extremely important. This hints at the concept that what influences school choice is not necessarily one or two factors, but rather the interaction of many factors.

It is interesting to consider the last four characteristics. The data from the present study indicates that being a 'single-sex' school or a school that 'parents attended' has no significant positive impact on one's choice of school. There is ambivalence towards the next two survey factors: the school is 'a private school' and the school 'has a primary and secondary section', with as

“*What influences school choice is not necessarily one or two factors, but rather the interaction of many factors*”

**Figure 1: The mean value of the respective school choice characteristics**



many respondents considering these positive characteristics as those that consider these negative characteristics. It is interesting to note that anecdotal evidence from school administrators suggests that having both a primary and secondary section is a high priority in school choice, but this result was not supported by the findings of this particular study.

**School characteristics: A close look**

The responses to the School Choice survey are further teased out by interaction with the interview data. The data from this study indicates that the families have prioritised clusters of school characteristics, which in turn give an indication of how families process school choice. The interview data elaborates on these decisions. Each of these clusters are now discussed in turn.

**Academic characteristics**

Academic characteristics are those that impact the learning and teaching program of the school and were the top priority for parents. They want their children to realise their potential and parents perceive that the academic program of the school plays a key role in this process. In particular parents prioritised the following characteristics:

**Characteristic 1: Quality teachers**

Families want quality teachers for their children. *Teaching quality is high* (M = 5.59) and *Teachers outstanding in their area* (M = 5.32) were prioritised as the first and eighth most important items respectively.

There was an overwhelming response from families when asked about the role of the teachers at the school their child was attending. Every family interviewed had a very strong position on the impact of teachers on their child’s education.

Some commented about the passion and enthusiasm of teachers:

I want the teachers in the school to be diligent enough and passionate enough to take on any kid even if they are the troublemaker in the class.

Others commented how the teachers at the school were an important consideration when it came to school choice, and the reputation of a teacher or teachers was enough to influence them to select that school. For example several families commented that a particular teacher had:

a great reputation as a good early childhood teacher,

and this attracted them to the school.

Overall, parents wanted teachers to be role models who were dedicated, qualified, active church members, interested and involved with kids, who could provide a great learning environment, nurture students and give them guidance, and be able to answer foundational spiritual questions.

**Characteristic 2: Academic quality and performance**

Parents want schools of high academic quality for their children. The means for *Academic quality is high* (M = 5.34) and *All round quality is high* (M =

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5.33) were in the upper range of the very important category and were prioritised as the fifth and seventh most important items in the survey.

Approximately half of the families interviewed said they were looking for a school for their children that had a high academic quality and performed well, particularly with respect to year 12 grades. A typical response follows:

I was interested in the academic quality of the school, teaching methods and classroom management, and the percentage of students that take year 12, and what are the pathways after school.

Many parents commented on how easy it was to get performance data through the *My School* website. Several of the families commented that they perceived their local Christian school to be struggling in terms of academic quality and performance and this has been confirmed for them by the data on the *My School* website.

### Characteristic 3: Opportunities for a diverse student population

Parents recognised that children generally and their children in particular, are very diverse. They want schools to offer opportunities across a broad spectrum to assist students across a range of academic abilities. They ranked *Opportunities for academically gifted students* ( $M = 5.41$ ) and *Opportunities for academically struggling students* ( $M = 5.33$ ) as very important, and the fourth and fifth highest in the ranking of school characteristics.

Many parents in the interview process commented on this aspect of schooling:

I want my children to be empowered through their education so they can be whoever they want to be, and [as well] have the intelligence and ability to make good decisions whether it be career or life partner, whether it's God or whether its friendships.

Kids should have every opportunity to excel.

This aspect of schooling is very important and can be problematic for schools, especially small schools due to resourcing implications.

### Quality of school life characteristics

Parents are looking to schools to provide a good quality of school life for their children. Students spend a significant amount of time in school and Quality of School Life has been shown to impact success at school (Mok, 2002; Leonard, Bourke & Schofield, 2000). In particular, parents want their children to attend a school that provides an

environment of care, acceptance and support. It is not surprising that the current study finds that parents prioritised highly student care characteristics. In particular they identified the following as important:

### Characteristic 4: Student support and pastoral care

Parents are anxiously looking to schools for high levels of support and pastoral care. *Student support/care high* ( $M = 5.53$ ) was prioritised as the second most important item in the survey. Approximately half of the families interviewed said they were looking for a school to nurture and support their children. A typical comment was:

We wanted somewhere where he would feel nurtured, where the teachers take a lot of interest in the kids.

Parents recognised the need for support both inside and outside of the classroom as students are supported and mentored by the school. In particular, parents noted the role of mentoring, and the impact schools can have on setting children on a course for a successful future:

...academics are very important but so is the nurturing side. I want the school to help my child to build their self-esteem through a high level of care, and by directing the kids to their future.

It was widely recognised that student nurture and support is needed for all students, independent of their academic and ability levels, further the parents perceived that this care plays a significant role in students' success at school and positively influences their life outside the school arena.

### Characteristic 5: Discipline

Parents want high levels of discipline. *Discipline is strong* ( $M = 5.43$ ) was prioritised as the third most important item in the survey.

Several of the families interviewed mentioned the importance of the school's approach to discipline. Most families indicate they are looking for a safe and accepting environment for their children, and a school where high behaviour standards are maintained. Poor discipline led some families to change the school their child was attending.

School had an open enrolment policy but failed to keep all the kids in line. We ended up moving schools.

There was some criticism of schools for growing their enrolment by accepting students that had been asked to leave other schools. Some families felt that this has led to a lowering of behaviour standards at the school.

“**Student nurture and support is needed for all students, independent of their academic and ability levels, further the parents perceived that this care plays a significant role in students' success**”

The following response summarised the position of a number of families:

Schools need to be more discerning.

## Vision characteristics

Parents are looking to schools to assist in the complex job of facilitating the personal growth of their children. They are seeking a school where the school has an expansive vision for the role that it plays in students' lives. Parents recognise the important role that the principal plays in this process and prioritised highly the visionary role of the principal. In particular they were looking for a school where:

### Characteristic 6: The principal has vision

The role of the principal was acknowledged as being very important ( $M = 5.30$ ). *The Principal has a vision for the school* was ranked relatively highly (9th of 29).

Nearly all of the families interviewed acknowledged the important foundational role of the principal in the school. The comments were similar in nature across all families interviewed.

We know how it works if the principal is good and doing a good job, the rest of the school will flourish. The principal plays an important role in the school. We know that corporate culture comes from the top.

If there had not been a change of principal at our school then our child would be going to a different school.

Many families make the determination on the school for their children based on the principal of the school.

We were looking for a good principal, in fact, the principal was the most influential [factor] in the decision making process, there was a stark contrast in the schools we looked at. The Principal at the school we chose we thought was absolutely fantastic.

Yes, the principal of the school played a big part in us selecting the school. She is an amazing woman.

He thought he was interviewing us, but really we were interviewing him. He had a great vision for the school.

It would seem that schools benefit from having a principal with vision, the ability to make the vision a reality, and the ability to clearly communicate this to the families that support the school.

## School ethos characteristics

Most schools have a particular ethos and identity that provides a distinct and unique educational environment (Freund, 2001). Christian and Public schools have a shared ethos in many areas. However, they are distinctly different in others (Youlden, 2008). Many parents are looking for schools with a particular ethos and special character, and school ethos characteristics were found to play a significant role in influencing parents' choice of school. In particular parents were influenced by:

### Characteristic 7: The school is a Christian school

Most of the families surveyed and interviewed were very clear that they wanted their children to attend a Christian school. *Effectively presents Christian worldview* ( $M = 5.20$ ), *Is a Christian school* ( $M = 4.77$ ), *Effectively presents the worldview of my denomination* ( $M = 4.57$ ), and *Is a school from run by my denomination* ( $M = 4.29$ ), are all seen as very important to important by parents.

The interview data identified different attitudes amongst the families interviewed. Some families interviewed responded that they were looking for:

An evangelical Christian school.

A Christian school was paramount. We wanted overt spirituality with students, teachers, and parents all supporting the values we have in the home.

A school that followed the same spiritual guidelines that we have at home.

A common theme was that families wanted a school that had a value system that paralleled their own. This will be discussed again in the next section.

Some families were particularly keen on selecting a school that was run by their denomination:

We wanted kids to have a Christian basis and to be nurtured by Christians but we also wanted our children to know why we belief (sic), what they believe.

Some families were critical of schools run by their denomination, and they believed that some of the schools had lost their distinctiveness by opening their enrolment up to a wider community enrolment.

We were looking for a school with a Christian influence, but the local Christian school has changed ethos by opening it up to the wider community.

“Parents are seeking a school that has an expansive vision for the role that it plays in students' lives”

“Some families expressed dismay that with an open enrolment policy, not all students at the school reflect the values established in the home”

## Characteristic 8: The values of the school parallel the values of the home

Parents want schools to support family values. *Values/Ethos parallels yours* ( $M = 5.08$ ) was seen as very important even though it is comparatively mid-ranked.

Many families expressed the desire to have the school support their family values. There was unanimous support for the idea that the home is foundational in setting the values for children, and the school needs to play a supporting role.

The school reinforces the spiritual life that is taught at home.

Some families expressed dismay that with an open enrolment policy, not all students at the school reflect the values established in the home, even though the school itself may endorse those values.

With kids at our local Christian school from non-Christian homes, there are influences on our children that we were not happy with.

## Academic and physical resource characteristics

Successful schools have the resources to successfully sustain the curricular and extracurricular programs of the school. These characteristics were rated the next most important by parents. In particular parents were looking for schools with:

### Characteristic 9: A wide curriculum and subject choice

*Has a wide curriculum choice* ( $M = 5.18$ ) indicates that parents saw the curriculum choice available at schools as very important. A significant number of families commented on how curriculum and subject choice impacted their choice of secondary school. Some families with children in Christian schools, tended to downplay the importance of subject choice.

We were not impacted by subject choices. We were looking for spiritual blessing.

Other families indicated that subject choice was a major consideration, particularly in the secondary school.

Subject choice for us was a real issue. We try and not make it the top issue, but it is really important and needs to be considered.

### Characteristic 10: Facilities and resources are significant

Parents completing the school choice questionnaire indicated *Facilities and resources are significant* and very important ( $M = 4.97$ ) in choosing a school, yet

ranked this trait in the middle of the school choice characteristics. There was however, a difference of opinion expressed across the interviews.

Some families interviewed, with children in Christian schools, did not rate the facilities and resources of the school as being very important. A typical comment from this group is:

The resources of the school were not an influence on our choice.

Other families did rate school resources and facilities as an important determinant of school choice.

When we looked elsewhere we were amazed at the level of resources of some schools.

The local Christian primary school was not an option as it was too small and could not offer the calibre of education with the facilities that the school has.

### Characteristic 11: A range of extra curricular activities

A similar pattern to the previous item emerged with respect to extra curricular activities. This item *Range of extra-curricular activities* was ranked in the last third of the school characteristics, but was still listed as important ( $M = 4.46$ ).

The interview data revealed a similar pattern. Families with children in Christian schools were happy with the level of extra curricular activities.

We do not care what sport programs, music the school offers. We are looking for our children to be nurtured.

Some families would like to see the Christian school offer more, particularly in the area of service activities.

In high school we would like to see more extra curricular activities for students, particularly in the area of service opportunities and positive peer group opportunities.

Other families, however, mentioned extra curricular activities as one of the main reasons they selected the school for their child.

We were looking for great extra curricular activities particularly in music and sport.

Some families claim that the many extra curricular activities that the school offers are a great way for parents to become involved in the life of the school.

We are as involved in the school as we want to be, due to all the extra curricular events the school offers such as sport and excursions.

## Logistical characteristics

Logistical factors impact on school choice. Parents with limited means have limited choices, while those with significant means have far more choice (Cahill, 2010). Certainly, in the present study, parents indicated that logistical factors, particularly fees and time required to travel to school, impacted their choice of school for their children, but these factors were given a lower priority.

### Characteristic 12: School fees: The figure values

The fees that schools charge were seen as being very important to families. *Fees are affordable* ( $M = 5.20$ ) ranked in the top half of the school characteristics. For many there is a threshold value for fees, and fees above this value ruled out that school as an option.

The interviews supported the idea that some families find the school fees a significant factor in selecting a school. A typical comment was:

Finance played a role in our decision.

### Characteristic 13: Time required to travel to school

Although *Close proximity to home* ( $M = 4.22$ ) was ranked in the last third of school characteristics, it was still seen as important by parents.

This factor, like the fees factor, is seen from two specific perspectives, the needs of primary students compared to secondary students. Travel time is interpreted as having a threshold function, such that there is a time to travel to school above which, the school is not seen as a realistic choice. This data would suggest that for many of the respondents this threshold time is 30 minutes for the primary aged student, and 60 minutes for the secondary aged student.

The interviews supported the idea that school proximity to the home is a major factor in influencing school choice. Over half of the families interviewed indicated that proximity played a large role in school selection.

Geographical proximity played a large role in selecting a school for our children. Especially when you have young children at home who were not in school. Hopefully this will not be an issue once the kids are in high school.

Proximity is a big issue due to the time needed for homework and extra curricular activities, and the travel puts the kids under too much pressure.

Some families are very committed to Christian education and move to be close to the school.

Proximity was not an issue for us. We moved to be close to the school. It would be good if there was a K-12 Christian school in our area.

A trend emerged from the interviews of families who were sending their children to Christian schools. Parents chose schools for their children based on criteria they had established for pre-primary. Some of these parents had every intention to change their child's school once they were old enough to travel on the bus. Many families however, became very comfortable in the school and when the time came to change, they did not follow through on their original intention.

At first, proximity was a big issue for us. We would never have considered sending our children to a Christian school at a distance when they were in Pre-primary. It was just too far for us and too long on the bus. We are very happy with the local school we selected and now he is older we do not want to shift him.

This is a real challenge for Christian schools. If children do not commence their education in a Christian school, it is very unlikely that parents will change the school the child attends part way through their primary school years

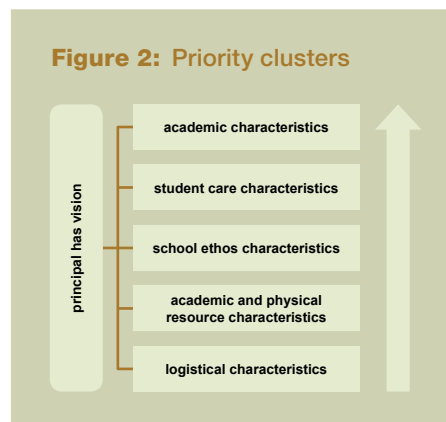
## Conclusion

Schools are now operating in a competitive environment. Principals, teachers and others interested in Christian schooling, need to acknowledge and pay attention to the various factors that will make their school attractive to parents. Forming a well thought out strategic and operational plan, may enhance the number of students whose lives benefit by attending a Christian school.

What is obvious from this study data, is that it is not one or two factors that significantly influence parents when making school choices. Rather, there is interplay of a range of factors. These are derived from clusters of school characteristics. These factors are selected and prioritised by two main

“*If children do not commence their education in a Christian school, it is very unlikely that parents will change the school the child attends part way through their primary school years*”

Figure 2: Priority clusters



parental motivations: the aspirations that they have for their children, and the anxieties they hold for them.

The factors identified in the current study include: Academic, Student Care, School Ethos, Resources, and Logistical considerations. These factors were assessed within the context of a leadership team and school principal who set a clear vision for the school (Figure 2).

The emergent factors (clusters of school characteristics) affecting school choice were clearly prioritised by parents, though the quantitative data was less clearly discriminated. Firstly, parents were looking for schools that have strong academic orientation. This has always been a key consideration of parents (Delaney, 2008) and can be understood as a strategy that parents use when they are trying to maximise the educational aspirations that they have for their children. It is known that the quality of teaching has a large influence on students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes in school (Rowe, 2003), and parents should attend to these factors as being very important.

Student care factors were considered the next in importance by parents. They want their children to experience a high quality of school life, as this contributes to student success in school (Leonard, Bourke and Schofield, 2003). Parents would like their children engaged in learning and to be supported in that process, as research shows that young people who are not engaged with learning, or who have poor relationships with peers and teachers, are more likely to engage in at-risk behaviours, report anxiety/depressive symptoms, and perform poorly at school (Bond, Butler, Thomas, Carlin, Glover, Bowes, & Patton, 2007).

Parents want the values of the school to reflect their own. The data from the study supported the idea that Christian families wanted to have their children in Christian schools. Most families agreed that the family was primarily responsible for the nurture of their children, however, they were looking to schools to assist them in this task. Schools are particularly important as social and academic learning environments, impacting not only on academic pathways, but also health and well-being of students. In fact, parents recognise that children need substantial connections in their lives and that along with connectedness to family, connectedness to school has emerged as a key factor in building positive educational outcomes and lower rates of at-risk behaviours (Bond, et al., 2007). Families would prefer that these connections are established within an ethos that is compatible and acceptable to them.

In selecting a school, parents are mindful of the academic and physical resources of the school. Most parents are looking for a school that offers a wholistic educational experience for their children and has the resources to deliver such. They are very aware of the logistic factors that are associated with attending school. Logistics is a complex issue and very individualistic, therefore it can be difficult to extrapolate and apply across differing contexts. For example, with respect to fees, there is a threshold above which parents cannot cross, and this threshold is distinctly different for different parents. Schools need to understand the threshold limits of their communities.

The results of the current study encourage educators to more fully understand what parents are looking for in a school. Such an understanding can enlarge vision, and allows them to respond with a set of actions that are often more contemporary and mesh with parents' expectations. In doing this, there are benefits for schools and school systems in the adoption of a broader perspective.

This report concludes with a word of caution. School leaders should keep the data presented in this report in perspective. When two cars in a race start jockeying for position, and trying to overtake each other, they quite often slow each other down. It is interesting to note that the evidence of the effectiveness of school choice in improving student achievement is mixed, and the evidence of the effects of competition between schools is inconclusive (Loeb, Valant and Kasman, 2011). Schools should not focus on being better than the neighbouring school but rather should seek to maximise the outcomes for their students in their context, and in doing so, should strive to establish a high quality educational environment for the benefit of all their students. **TEACH**

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