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## Parent Magnet School Choice in a Large Urban School District

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PARENT MAGNET SCHOOL CHOICE IN A LARGE URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

By  
Catherine Diane Payne

A Dissertation Submitted to the  
Gardner-Webb University School of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University  
2019

## Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Catherine Diane Payne under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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## **Abstract**

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The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to understand the perspectives of parents who choose magnet schools. The study investigated sources of information parents use in their school search, factors influencing them to apply to a magnet school, features of charter and private schools that attract them, and reasons for choosing a magnet school. Through an analysis of 984 surveys from parents who applied to a magnet school for the 2018-2019 school year and data from focus groups, the researcher found that recommendations from others is the most important source of information in parent school searches. Parents also consulted online resources, participated in magnet information sessions, studied school test scores and ratings, and toured schools. Important influences on parent school choice were the magnet program theme, impressions of school leadership, school reputation, diversity, and meeting the individual needs of the child. Parents had mixed feelings about school grades and ratings. For many parents, school tours were the deciding factor in their school choice. Distance to the school, having all their children in the same school, and child care needs were limiting factors. Parents cited small school and small class size, specialized curriculum, challenging academic programs, school reputation, and location as the main attractions to charter and private schools. Parents did not choose a charter or a private school because of their lack of resources for children with special needs, their lack of diversity, their lack of transportation and lunch, and the additional financial costs.

*Keywords:* school choice, magnet schools, parents, charter schools

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

School choice is a hallmark of education today. Although parents have always had choices in where their children attend school through enrolling in a private school or by purchasing a home in the neighborhood where their preferred school was located, the options for choice of schooling have significantly expanded in recent years. Magnet schools and charter schools are two of the most popular forms of school choice but certainly not the only ones. Parents can choose homeschooling and private schools, either religious or sectarian. Parents can choose virtual schools or other online educational opportunities for educating their children. Some states offer tax credits or vouchers for low-income students to attend private schools (J. Davis, 2013; Egalite & Wolf, 2016; Fuller, 1995; Viteritti, 2002). The newest form of school choice, empowerment scholarship accounts, provide state funds for educational purposes to students who qualify (D. Harris, 2017; Railey, 2016).

### **Proponents and Critics of School Choice**

With school choice clearly a feature of the American education landscape, it is appropriate to consider the benefits and drawbacks of school choice. Proponents of school choice see choice as a school reform effort and a way to bring about needed changes in education (Hoxby, 2002; Schneider, Teske, Marschall, Mintrom, & Roch, 1997). They contend that choice introduces competition for students and will bring about school improvement and innovation as traditional public schools respond to the competition. Since parents have options for where their children attend school, schools that are not attractive will lose students, according to proponents. If some schools lose students and have to close, that is appropriate, proponents argue.

In advocating for a voucher system, Friedman (1955) proposed that the market theory should be applied to education. Friedman argued that if parents had the opportunity to choose schools, schools would have to compete for students and would implement needed changes to attract parents and students. Chubb and Moe (1988, 1990) also argued that the competitive education market would result in school improvement and enhance the quality of education all students receive. Because of market principles at work, the laws of supply and demand would operate, and schools would do more to satisfy their customers (parents and students); the result would be improvement in the education the schools provide. Chubb and Moe argued that if parents were not satisfied with the school, they could exit and choose another school.

Parents know their children best, so the argument for choice goes, and are most knowledgeable of their children's needs and are best qualified to determine the school that would be the "best fit" for them (Wespieser, Durbin, & Sims, 2015). Proponents of choice believe that because parents have a choice, schools will be more responsive to the needs and interests of parents and children.

Critics of school choice, on the other hand, maintain that school choice will result in increased racial and socioeconomic segregation and in schools that are unequal (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011; Henig, 1995; Ni, 2010). Contrary to the adherents of market theory who believe that if market principles are applied to schools, education would improve as a result of competition, critics who disagree with market theory do not find schools improve as an effect of competition. Cookson (1994) examined the market model and found, "There is little evidence thus far, however, that market models of educational reform lead to innovative schools and school systems" (p.

118). J. Davis (2013) used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS) and the Common Core of Data (CCD) in her study to determine if there is evidence to support market model proponents' beliefs that charter schools create competition for traditional public schools and this competition will result in improvement in student achievement and educational practices. J. Davis (2013) concluded there was little support for the market model proponents' position.

Patrinos (2000) studied market forces in education and looked at school choice in the United States and other countries. Patrinos challenged the fundamental premise of proponents that school choice will result in improvement to public schools from competition and concluded that more research needs to occur.

Orfield (2013) challenged the assumptions on which market theory is based. In Orfield's opinion, market theory is based on the assumption that people will choose based on educational quality, but he found that people actually often choose on other factors such as convenience or proximity of the school to home.

Orfield (2013) promoted the integration theory of choice, which has as its goal to get disadvantaged students into schools and classrooms with advantaged students (p. 55). Concerned that choice can have harmful results, Orfield believed that "much of the discussion of choice issues has been painfully shallow, full of vague concepts and unsupported claims" (p. 63). Orfield believed that inequality is a product of school choice and that people do not all have the same information and opportunities; and as a result, some receive greater benefits from the exercise of choice than others.

The choice process school districts use may inhibit all parents from having equal access (Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012). Researchers have found that parents do not all

have the same familiarity with how to select schools and do not have the same access to sources of information about the various school choices (André-Bechely, 2005; Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012). Critics of choice state that uncontrolled choice will lead to the “creaming” of the best students and thus will increase levels of stratification (Carlson, 2014). Critics are concerned that traditional public schools are losing students and are becoming more racially identifiable as more parents are choosing an alternative placement other than the traditional public school (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2013; Villavicencio, 2013).

Central to the argument of giving parents the right to choose the school for their children is the belief that parents will take the time to consider their school choices and will examine all facets of the school decision. They will study all the information provided; visit the schools; talk to teachers and principals; weigh the pros and cons of each choice; and then, after careful consideration, make a rational decision (Fuller, 1995; Hamilton & Guinn, 2005). Parents, however, may not have or take the time to objectively analyze school options and may choose based on factors such as convenience or proximity to the school (Ogawa & Dutton, 1994; Orfield, 2013).

### **The Growth of School Choice**

The dramatic surge in interest in school choice can be traced to specific events, influential proponents voicing their support for giving parents more choice in where their children go to school, and court decisions. In 1986, the National Governors’ Association held a meeting in which the governors discussed their concerns about the current state of education and established task forces to discuss educational reform. The task forces were directed to find answers to their seven tough questions and propose “action agendas”

(Alexander, 1986). The governors' findings and recommendations were published in their report, "Time for Results: The Governors' 1991 Report on Education" (Alexander, 1986). One of the recommendations was that "parents should have more choice in the public schools their children attend" (Alexander, 1986, p. 202).

Lamar Alexander, governor of Tennessee at the time and chairman of the National Governors' Association, was an influential spokesperson for the governors and garnered interest and support for the states to follow through with implementing the governors' recommendations (Alexander, 1986). Implementation of the recommendations meant working with educators to reform education and to regularly communicate what each state was doing to address the seven issues.

President Bush also lent his support and advocated for choice and competition among schools. President Bush (as cited in Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1992) stated, "For too long we've shielded schools from competition and allowed our schools a damaging monopoly of power" (p. 13).

Courts have played an active role in the speed and direction of school choice with their rulings in a number of legal challenges. The Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) declared "separate but equal" unconstitutional, and in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1955), schools were directed to desegregate "with all deliberate speed" (p. 301). Legislatures, however, passed laws to try to postpone the integration of schools; and school districts operated under "freedom of choice" for a number of years. Black children who applied to attend White schools were frequently denied admission; and even though some Black students were allowed to attend previously all-White schools, they often faced an uncomfortable situation (Orfield, 2013).

School districts were forced to do more to desegregate schools after the court ruled in *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* (1968) that freedom of choice was not enough. As a result of the Supreme Court decision, many school districts came under court order and had to use busing and student assignment to desegregate schools. With the 1971 decision of *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, the school board was required to use court-ordered mandatory busing if they could not find another way to voluntarily desegregate the schools. This period of history was marked by “White flight” with many parents choosing to remove their children from public schools rather than have them attend school with Black children (Renzulli & Evans, 2005).

### **Magnet Schools**

One solution to the problem of the mass exodus of White children and forced busing for school desegregation was to entice parents to allow their children to voluntarily leave their neighborhood school to attend a school in a predominately minority area and thus desegregate schools without forced student assignment and mandatory busing (Blazer, 2012; Grooms & Williams, 2015). With the federal courts ordering school districts to desegregate, school district leaders saw offering magnet schools as a means to respond to the courts without using forced student assignment. By implementing magnet schools, district leaders believed that parents would voluntarily choose to send their children to a school outside of their neighborhood in order to participate in the special course offerings at the magnet school (Blank, Levine, & Steel, 1996; Smrekar & Honey, 2015).

Magnet schools are typically located in urban areas (U.S. Department of

Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2004). The original purpose of magnet schools was two-fold: (a) to provide an alternative to forced student assignment and mandatory busing; and (b) to provide innovative programs such as visual and performing arts, environmental and international studies, and challenging mathematics and science offerings, programs not offered in the neighborhood school (Blank et al., 1996; Grooms & Williams, 2015). Magnet schools are designed to draw students from their neighborhood schools to attend schools in the urban area for the specialized programs offered. The rationale for magnet schools was that students would willingly leave their assigned school close to home to attend schools further away for the specialized programs and courses not offered in their neighborhood school (Smrekar & Honey, 2015). The school was thus a “magnet” to attract students. Most magnet schools provided transportation and free and reduced lunch to students who qualified. School districts utilized magnet schools for diversity and to increase student achievement (Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2013).

McCarver Elementary School in Tacoma, Washington, is usually credited with being the first magnet school. McCarver was 91% African-American in a district with only 7,000 African-Americans among its population of 160,000 students. The courts held the Tacoma School District in violation of segregation laws and ordered the district to desegregate the schools. With a \$200,000 federal government grant, the district was able to offer a specialized curriculum at McCarver and selected 200 White students by lottery from throughout the district to attend the school. In 1968, its first year as a magnet school, McCarver went from 91% to 64% minority; and 2 years later, the minority percentage was less than 50%. The attraction of the magnet school enabled the

district to avoid mandatory busing and successfully integrate the school (Rossell, 2005).

In 1969, Trotter Elementary School opened as a magnet school in Boston. Throughout the 1970's, the number of magnet programs and magnet schools grew substantially. Skyline High School opened in Houston in 1970; Minneapolis and Cincinnati opened a number of magnet schools about the same time. With the court's decision in *Morgan v. Kerrigan* (1975), magnet programs were approved as a way for the Boston schools to desegregate.

Within a few years, many school districts opened magnet schools. The number of districts offering magnet programs and magnet schools expanded with the availability of funds from the federal government. In 1976, the 94th Congress passed Pub. L. No 94-482 § 321 which extended and revised the 1972 Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA) and enabled school districts to apply for federal funding to develop and enhance magnet schools (Education Amendments of 1976). With the offering of innovative programs and opportunities not available in the neighborhood schools, school districts provided parents the option of choosing to send their children to magnet schools even if they had to travel further and attend school in a predominately minority part of town. For parents and students, the important draw of the magnet school was what they found at the end of the long bus ride. If they found a school program that was innovative and challenging, they found it was well worth leaving the neighborhood and taking the long bus ride (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2004).

Magnet schools have now been in existence for over 40 years. The federal government instituted the Magnet Schools of America Program (MSAP) in 1985 and since that time has offered funds on a competitive basis for magnet schools to both



reduce racial isolation and provide innovative programs. Many school districts benefitted from these funds; and since the beginning of MSAP, millions of dollars have been awarded through the MSAP grant competition (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2018). By 1981, there were more than 1,000 magnet schools; and by 1991, the number had grown to 2,400 magnet schools in the country. Ten years later, the number had increased to 3,100; and in 2016, there were 3,285 magnet schools (McFarland et al., 2017). Currently there are 4,340 magnet schools in 46 states serving 3.5 million students (Magnet Schools of America, 2018).

### **The Charter School Movement**

In the early years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, magnet schools were the only option for a public school choice other than the traditional school. However, since 1991 with the issuance of the first charter in Minnesota, and the opening of the first charter school in St. Paul in 1992 (Finnegan et al., 2004), magnet schools have faced competition from charter schools for both students and public funds. Charter schools, like magnet schools, offer parents a public school choice.

The charter school movement began as a way to improve schools by providing autonomy and flexibility. Charter schools were free from many state and local regulations and thus could experiment with new and innovative ways of teaching and learning without many of the restrictions that applied to traditional schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools Charter School Data, 2017). A majority of Americans support charter schools as evidenced by the results of the 47th Annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes about the Public Schools in which two thirds of the respondents indicated they favor charter schools.

As the rapid growth of charter schools demonstrates, many parents are choosing the charter school alternative. In 1999-2000 there were 1,524 charter schools in the United States, enrolling 339,678 students, 1.7 percent of the total number of public schools. By 2014-15 there were 6,747 charter schools enrolling 2,721,786 students, 5.4 percent of the total number of public schools (Snyder, deBrey, & Dillow, 2016). Between 2004 and 2014, the percentage of students who attended charter schools grew from 2% to 5%; and the number of children enrolled grew from 0.9 million to 2.7 million (McFarland et al., 2017, p. 92). During these same years, the number of students attending public traditional schools decreased by 0.4 million. In 2016, there were 6,939 charter schools with 3.1 million students attending charter schools in 44 states and the District of Columbia (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016).

### **Homeschooling**

Homeschooling is another option parents can choose to educate their children. Homeschooling has also seen growth in the number of parents selecting this school choice (Redford, Battle, & Bielick, 2017). According to the National Household Education Surveys (NHES) program conducted by National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the number of homeschooled children in 1999 was 850,000, 1.7% of the school-aged population (Bielick, Chandler, & Broughman, 2001). The percentage of homeschooled children doubled by 2012 when 1.8 million children were homeschooled, which is 3.4% of the school-aged population. Approximately 83% of homeschooled children were White and non-poor. In responding to their reasons for homeschooling, nine of 10 parents indicted their decision was due to concerns about the school environment (Redford et al., 2017).

## **Problem Statement**

With the expansion of the choice movement and the increase in the number of school choices available to parents, magnet schools are facing increased competition. Magnet schools have existed for a long period of time, but they may not be able to continue to maintain their attraction with the threat from other school choices, particularly charter schools. If they are to be successful at meeting the current challenges, school districts must address the competition from charter schools and the allure of the other school choices available to parents.

Magnet schools began with the twin goals of integration and innovation; but with recent court decisions and the plethora of school choice alternatives, especially the rapid growth of charter schools, it has become increasingly difficult for magnet schools to offer a diverse school environment (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2004). School districts may need to make changes to continue to attract parents looking for a public school alternative to choose a magnet school rather than a charter school.

Magnet schools are essential to the success of a large urban school district. They are both a means of desegregating schools voluntarily and a means of reducing concentrations of minority students and students of poverty (Goldring & Smrekar, 2002). They are a means of providing school choice and innovation (Grooms & Williams, 2015). The increasing segregation of schools, especially in cities, requires an aggressive approach to providing diverse populations in all schools in a district. Because of the importance of magnet schools as a means to reduce high concentrations of students of poverty and create more diverse student populations, it is essential to know the factors

that impact parent choice of a magnet school and the features that will attract students and result in a successful magnet school experience.

Parents are attracted to magnet schools because they see distinct advantages and benefits for their children. This study of parent magnet school choice in a large urban school district will provide an increased understanding of the sources of information parents use in the school search, the factors influencing parent decisions to apply to a magnet school, and the factors influencing their decisions to choose a magnet school rather than a charter or a private school. This study will provide an increased understanding of the parent school choice decision-making process and will provide evidence to determine if parent school choice decisions are based on a rational basis or if there are other influences on their decision-making.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine the sources of information parents use in making the decision to consider a magnet school, the factors that influence parent decisions to apply to a magnet school in a large urban school district, and the factors that influence parent decisions to choose a magnet school rather than a charter or a private school.

### **Context of the Study**

With 177 schools and 160,000 students, the school district in this study is the largest school system in North Carolina and the 15th largest in the nation. The school district is located in the capital of the state and in a county that has a population of more than one million and is 94% urban and 6% rural. The city hosts four universities and two colleges and is considered one of the top places to live in the United States.

In the early 1970's, there were two school districts in the county, the city school district and the county school district. The city school district was predominately minority with many empty classrooms due to declining enrollment. The county school district, located in the suburbs, was predominately White with overcrowded schools due to people moving from the city to the suburbs and the influx of new people to the area. In 1973, the merger of the two school districts was proposed, and in a public referendum was rejected by a 3:1 margin. In 1975, the government threatened to cut off federal funds to the city school district. In 1976, the General Assembly voted to force the merger of the two school districts, and the new school district came into existence. In 1977, the Office of Civil Rights approved the district's student assignment plan, and federal funds were restored (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2004).

As a planned approach to utilize underutilized schools in the city and to provide a voluntary way to desegregate schools, the school district instituted the Schools of Choice Program. The superintendent promoted the idea of magnet schools to parents in a series of small group gatherings in homes and through an aggressive marketing campaign. The recruitment effort was successful, and 28 magnet schools opened in the 1982-1983 school year.

The magnet program began with four models: Gifted and Talented, International Studies, Classical Studies, and Extended Day. In the beginning, there were no prerequisites for students to be accepted to a magnet school. Students were assigned to magnet schools on a first-come, first-served basis. All students in magnet schools participated in the magnet program, whether they were assigned to the school as base

students or accepted as magnet students through the application process.

It has been more than 40 years since the district began magnet schools. Currently, there are 46 magnet schools and six early colleges in the district. Magnet themes include the following: Leadership & Technology, Gifted & Talented, International Baccalaureate, Academy of the Visual & Performing Arts (6-8), and Language Immersion/Global Studies.

The magnet objectives are to reduce high concentrations of poverty, promote diverse populations, maximize use of school facilities, and provide innovative and/or expanded educational opportunities. The magnet school program in the district has been highly successful and many individual schools have been recognized by Magnet Schools of America, the national association for magnet schools (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2018).

### **Significance of the Study**

Since their inception, magnet schools have been an effective means of both innovation and equity. Magnet schools have been effectively used as a means to reduce high concentrations of students of poverty and have been an effective vehicle for diversifying student populations (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2018); however, with the rapid growth of school choice, including the expansion of charter schools, the growing interest in vouchers, and the increasing isolation of minority students and students of poverty in traditional public schools, magnet schools are currently facing increased competition from alternative school choices. With over 16% of parents choosing a nontraditional means of educating their

children and with the number growing rapidly, it is imperative to find ways to address the challenges facing public education.

Understanding the factors that influence parents to choose to have their children participate in a magnet school experience will provide valuable information and enable policy makers and educators to make changes to strengthen magnet schools as a choice option. School districts will be able to address future parent concerns and make necessary improvements to prevent flight from traditional and magnet public schools. Understanding how parents make their schooling decisions in this era of school choice is critical. With increasing resegregation in schools, ways must be found to ensure diverse populations in all schools in the district. Policy makers and educators can design strategies to attract students and parents to magnet schools, including those that are under enrolled and have high concentrations of minority students and students of poverty.

Although researchers have studied magnet schools and charter schools, there is a scarcity of recent research on the factors that influence parents to make a decision to send their children to a magnet school in a large urban school district. There is a need to know the specific advantages parents perceive their children will receive and to determine whether parents are choosing a magnet school because of perceived academic benefits; because of personal, nonacademic reasons; or for other reasons. When district leaders are aware of the sources of information parents use when making a school choice, the factors that influence parent choice of a magnet school, and the factors that influence them to choose a magnet school rather than a charter school or a private school, they can make changes to strengthen magnet schools as a choice option. Information from parents who chose magnet schools will be helpful to school and school district leaders as they seek

ways to improve the magnet school choice process.

Central to determining how parents make a school choice is the issue of whether parents are rational consumers who objectively and carefully analyze the costs and benefits of their school decision, as proponents of rational choice theory would suggest, or whether parents make their school choice decision more subjectively using nonacademic reasons such as convenience or proximity. A study of the factors that impact parent choice of a magnet school and their perceptions of the benefits their children receive from a magnet school education will provide additional knowledge about what parents value and the factors that influence their school choice. This information can be used to improve both traditional public schools and magnet schools.

Although previous studies have examined the influences on parent school choice, there is a need for additional research. The study contributes to the knowledge of school choice by expanding the understanding of sources of information parents use, the factors influencing school choice of a magnet school and the factors that influence parents to choose a magnet school rather than a charter or a private school.

#### **Acknowledgement of Researcher Bias**

The researcher has a strong belief in the important role magnet schools play in the success of the school district by reducing minority isolation in schools, making schools more diverse, providing innovative and challenging programs, and gaining parent support for public education. The researcher has served as a principal of two magnet schools and saw how they could be effectively structured to attract students to choose to leave their neighborhood schools to attend a school at a considerable distance from their home. The researcher believes that if parents and students believe they have chosen their school,



students are more likely to apply themselves and take advantage of the opportunities provided at magnet schools.

### **Research Questions**

Parents who choose magnet schools are making a significant choice with lifelong implications for their children. It is essential to understand what attracts parents to choose a magnet school. This study addressed the three following questions:

1. What sources of information do parents use in making the decision to consider a magnet school?
2. What factors influence parent decisions to apply to a magnet school for their children?
3. What factors influence parent decisions to choose a magnet school rather than a charter or a private school?

With the answers to these questions, school districts can design strategies to attract parents and students to magnet schools and particularly to magnet schools that are under enrolled and have high concentrations of students of poverty. The purpose of this study was to determine the sources of information parents use in making the decision to consider a magnet school, the factors that influence parent decisions to apply to a magnet school in a large urban school district, and the factors that influence parent decisions to choose a magnet school rather than a charter or private school.

### **Definitions of Terms**

**School choice.** Refers to the options from which parents can choose to provide education for their children. These include public schools (traditional, magnet, and charter), private schools (both religious and sectarian), home schooling, vouchers, and

empowerment scholarship accounts.

**Magnet school.** Public schools that are designed to attract students for the innovative programs offered to create a diverse student population. They are public schools that typically do not have entrance requirements and are open to all students in the district. They provide transportation and students participate in the free or reduced lunch program.

**Base school.** The school that students are assigned to attend according to where they live. In the school district of this study, the base school could be a magnet school if the magnet school is located in the area where the student lives.

**Charter school.**

Charter schools are semi-autonomous public schools that receive public funds. They operate under a written contract with a state, district, or other entity (referred to as an authorizer or sponsor). This contract—or charter—details how the school will be organized and managed, what students will be expected to achieve, and how success will be measured. Many charter schools are exempt from a variety of laws and regulations affecting other public schools if they continue to meet the terms of their charters. (Wixom, 2018, p. 1)

**Traditional school.** Public schools that typically are the schools in the neighborhood where one's residence is located.

**Home school.** In homeschooling, parents or other persons provide education at the student's home. Students who are home schooled are typically required to take the standardized tests or assessments required of all students in the state.

**School vouchers.** Subsidies given directly to parents to use for tuition at

participating schools.

**Empowerment scholarship accounts.** Accounts that typically provide 90% of the state funding which the school the child previously attended would have received. These funds may be used for education expenses and are provided upon application to those who are eligible. Children may qualify if they are eligible for special education services, they attended a school received a failing grade, they are foster children who have been adopted, or their parent is a member of the armed forces (D. Harris, 2017).

**Interdistrict choice.** Families can choose to attend a school outside of the school district in which they reside (Carlson, 2014).

### **Limitations/Delimitations of the Study**

This study is about the decisions and perceptions of parents who chose magnet schools in a large urban school district at a particular time. The assumption is made that the parents completing the survey and participating in the focus groups were honest and accurate in their responses to the questions. Because of the small number of participants in the focus groups, the answers participants gave to the questions may not be generalizable to a larger population. The results of the study pertain to this one particular school district.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to this mixed-methods study of parent choice of a magnet school in a large urban school district. The chapter includes an overview of the expansion of school choice and the increased competition to magnet schools, the purpose of the study, the

significance of the study, the definition of terms, and limitations/delimitations of the study.

The second chapter provides a review of the literature relevant to the study, including research on the history of school choice, student achievement and diversity in magnet schools and charter schools, and studies of school satisfaction and parent preferences. The third chapter describes the methodology for the study, the context of the study, participants in the study, the instruments that were used in the study, the research design, and the data analysis. The fourth chapter presents the findings of the study including the answers to the three research questions, descriptive statistics, and a narrative with rich descriptions of the major themes and interpretations of the results. The fifth chapter summarizes the results of the study, discusses the findings, and makes recommendations for practical implementations and future research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

School choice is a critical decision for many parents today. With the rapid growth in the number of parents choosing alternatives other than traditional public schools, it is essential to understand the process parents use in making a school decision. What

sources of information do they use? What factors are important to them when they make a school choice? If they consider magnet, charter, and private schools, what factors influence them to choose a magnet school rather than a charter or private school?

The following review of the literature describes research studies about school choice with an emphasis on studies of the two public schools of choice, magnet and charter schools, and studies of parent preferences. Included in the review are studies of student performance in magnet and charter schools, studies of the impact of school choice on the racial makeup of schools, and studies about the parental school choice process.

The purpose of this study was to determine the sources of information parents use in making the decision to consider a magnet school, the factors that influence parent decisions to apply to a magnet school in a large urban school district, and the factors that influence parent decisions to choose a magnet school rather than a charter or a private school. This study provides information about parent perspectives on the school search and on the school choice decision-making process.

### **School Choice and Student Achievement**

A number of researchers have conducted studies to determine the impact of school choice on student achievement. Researchers have examined student performance results in magnet schools and charter schools and found mixed results (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Center for Research on Educational Outcomes [CREDO], 2009; Clark, Gleason, Tuttle, & Silverberg, 2014; Gamoran, 1996; Poppell & Hague, 2001). They have also examined the impact of the use of vouchers on student achievement and found negative results (Witte, 1996).

The report *School choice: A special report* by the Carnegie Foundation for the

Advancement of Teaching (1992) is one of the seminal studies of school choice, and its findings and recommendations are still relevant today. In a yearlong study on school choice, researchers surveyed 1,000 parents across the county and talked to parents, teachers, school district leaders, and chief state school officers to gather information on school choice. They examined places in the United States where choice was in operation and working well such as Montclair, Cambridge, and East Harlem. They also examined places where choice was hurting school districts, where districts were losing funding and students. Researchers found that Americans are positive about choice, that parents and students who participate in school choice feel good about their decision, and that statewide choice programs tend to widen the gap between rich and poor districts. They found little evidence of the effectiveness of school choice on student achievement.

A number of studies have found that student achievement is higher in magnet schools. In an early study, Gamoran (1996) used data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) to determine if students in magnet schools have higher achievement. Gamoran examined student achievement of students from eighth to 10th grade in 48 magnet schools, 213 comprehensive high schools, 57 Catholic schools, and 39 secular private schools. Gamoran found that student achievement in science, reading, and social studies was higher in magnet schools, and student achievement in mathematics was slightly higher in Catholic schools. Gamoran found no differences in achievement between students in public comprehensive schools and students in private secular schools (p. 44). Gamoran offered two possible reasons for the higher achievement in magnet schools: that relationships between students and teachers and among students could account for the difference and that the greater resources which magnet schools receive

could impact student achievement.

Betts, Kitmitto, Levin, Boss, and Eaton (2015) analyzed student achievement in 21 elementary schools which had received funds from MSAP to convert to magnet schools. Their findings revealed that student achievement increased in English/language arts but not mathematics in the traditional magnet schools. In a mixed-research study, Fancsali (1998) examined student achievement of magnet students and non-magnet students and found that student achievement was higher in magnet programs. Fancsali found that students who were not in a school-within-a-school magnet program had the lowest academic achievement. Fancsali found that magnet schools received more resources and that teachers and students in non-magnet schools felt stigmatized.

Oudghiri (2008) examined four school-within-a-school magnet programs in four high schools in a Midwestern school district that had received an MSAP grant. Oudghiri compared student achievement of magnet and non-magnet students as measured by standardized test scores. Oudghiri also interviewed magnet students about their experiences in the magnet program. Oudghiri found that the academic achievement of magnet students in two of the schools was significantly higher than the achievement of non-magnet students. Oudghiri found that magnet students experience pressure, have higher expectations for themselves, and need strong support to be successful in the magnet program.

In their study of magnet programs in the Duval Public Schools in Florida, Poppell and Hague (2001) examined indicators to assess the overall effectiveness of magnet schools and found that achievement was higher in magnet schools. Poppell and Hague also found that magnet schools had a higher percentage of school volunteers.

Siegel-Hawley and Frankenberg (2012) surveyed magnet school leaders from 51 different school districts across the country. Respondents completed a 19-item survey by Magnet Schools of America that was analyzed by researchers at the Civil Rights Project. Forty-eight of the respondents were in districts that had received funding from the federal government's MSAP grants. Survey results showed that student achievement rose in over 80% of the districts receiving MSAP grants.

Other studies have found mixed results or no difference between the academic performance of students in magnet schools and students in non-magnet schools. Wang, Schweig, and Herman (2017) used test scores on state tests for English and mathematics to examine student achievement in 24 magnet schools in five districts in four states as part of the evaluation of the use of MSAP funds by schools which had received an MSAP grant. They found mixed achievement results and no overall magnet school effect. Wang et al. hypothesized that "local features and contexts are influential in determining the extent to which magnet schools are effective at promoting student achievement" (p. 91). In a Florida study, Blazer (2012) found mixed results in her research on student achievement in magnet schools and non-magnet schools.

In a study of integration and student achievement in magnet schools in the Houston school district, J. C. Harris (2015) examined test results in over 100 magnet schools in the years 2007-2008 to 2013-2014 using standardized scores in mathematics and reading to measure student achievement. J. C. Harris (2015) found there was little effect on student achievement for students attending magnet schools. In another study, Archbald and Kaplan (2004) compared National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores in districts that had magnet schools and those that did not and found no



significant differences in student scores between districts. Reed (2004) compared the academic performance of Black students in 40 elementary schools (20 magnet schools and 20 traditional public schools) in four North Carolina school districts and found no significant difference between Black students enrolled in magnet schools and traditional schools.

In an analysis of student achievement in the Wake County Public School System, Penta (2001) examined test results for all elementary schools in the district to determine if there were differences in student achievement in magnet and traditional elementary schools. Penta analyzed data from the 2000 state ABC tests and the WCPSS School Effectiveness Index developed from End-of-Grade (EOG) tests in reading and mathematics and the fourth grade writing assessment. Penta found that after controlling for race and students on free or reduced lunch, there was no significant difference in student achievement at magnet schools and non-magnet schools.

In a longitudinal study of student achievement in the 23 magnet schools in St. Louis, Grooms and Williams (2015) divided the magnet schools into two categories, those schools that had 50% or less Black students and those schools with higher than 50% Black students. The researchers found that “black student achievement was higher in magnet schools that were less racially isolated” (p. 465). In schools with more than 50% Black students, student achievement was lower than the district average.

Similar to the research on student achievement in magnet schools, the research on student achievement in charter schools has produced mixed results. While some studies have found that student achievement is higher in charter schools, other studies have found no difference between the academic performance of students in charter schools and

students in magnet schools and traditional public schools. Other studies have found that students in charter schools perform worse than students in magnet schools and traditional public schools.

Tuttle, Teh, Nichols-Barrer, Gill, and Gleason (2010) used state assessment results in reading and mathematics to measure achievement to determine the effectiveness of the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) charter middle schools on student achievement scores. They compared KIPP students with students with similar demographics in the local public schools and found positive results for students in 18 of the 22 schools in mathematics and for 12 of 15 KIPP schools in reading after students had been in the KIPP program for 2 years. The achievement results were negative in reading for two schools; and one school had a negative impact for mathematics the first year, but results were positive after 2 years. The researchers did not find any evidence that KIPP middle schools were enrolling students with higher achievement than students in the local school district. They did find higher attrition rates in one third of the KIPP schools and higher grade retention rates in fifth and sixth grades. They found significant achievement gains for both reading and mathematics after students had been in the program for 3 years.

Abdulkadiroglu et al. (2009) used the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Tests (MCAT) to compare academic performance of charter and pilot students in middle and high schools to students in traditional public schools in Boston. They found that students in charter schools at both the middle schools and high schools had significantly higher achievement scores in both English/language arts and mathematics.

Cannata and Penaloza (2008) studied the relationship between teacher

qualifications, working conditions, and student achievement in traditional public schools, magnet schools, charter schools, and private schools. The researchers hypothesized that if teachers had higher qualifications and better working conditions, the result would be higher student achievement. Using a large sample of schools and using state assessment data, they found that charter schools had higher student achievement, magnet schools did not affect student achievement, and private schools had a negative effect. In charter schools, students who had teachers who were not certified had lower achievement.

In a 2009 national study of the performance of charter school students in 16 states, CREDO at Stanford University found that 17% of the charter schools provide superior educational opportunities for their students. Nearly half of the charter schools nationwide have results that are no different from the local public school options and over a third, 37 percent, deliver learning results that are significantly worse than their students would have realized had they remained in traditional public schools. (p. 1)

Charter school students were .01 standard deviations below traditional public school students in reading and .03 standard deviations below traditional public school students in mathematics.

The analysis showed that although some charter school subgroups performed better than their traditional public school counterparts, other subgroups did not perform as well. Charter school students in poverty and English Language Learner (ELL) students had greater gains than their counterparts in traditional public schools. Black and Hispanic students had gains that were lower than their counterparts in traditional public schools. Other findings were that the length of time in a charter school can positively

affect learning and that the effectiveness of charter schools varies greatly by state.

Clark et al. (2014) studied student achievement in 33 charter middle schools in 13 states using data on state assessments to determine the effect of attending a charter school on student achievement in mathematics and reading. Researchers compared results for students admitted to charter schools through a randomized lottery with students who were not admitted. They found that achievement was negative but not statistically significant for students in middle school charter schools. Results varied for subgroups, with positive results in mathematics achievement for disadvantaged students in urban charter schools and negative results for advantaged students.

Sass (2006) used longitudinal data of all public school students in Florida to examine student achievement in charter schools and to determine the impact of charter schools on traditional public schools. Sass found that initially, student performance in reading and mathematics is lower in new charter schools; but after charter schools have been operating for 5 years, student achievement in mathematics is similar to mathematics achievement in traditional public schools, and reading scores are higher by an average of 9% in charter schools. For Florida charter schools that target a particular student population, Sass found that mathematics scores are lower and reading scores are similar to scores of traditional public school students. Sass did not find any difference in student achievement between charter schools operated by nonprofit organizations and those run by for-profit companies.

Using data from the North Carolina Education Research Data Center, Bifulco and Ladd (2006) followed students in charter schools from third grade to eighth grade and found that charter school students “made considerably smaller achievement gains in

charter schools than they would have in traditional public schools” (p. 52). Unlike other studies that found that differences in achievement between charter schools and traditional schools disappeared after 3 years, Bifulco and Ladd found that the negative effects continued beyond 3 years. The researchers also found that charter school competition had a negligible effect on student achievement in traditional public schools.

Ladd, Clotfelter, and Holbein (2015) examined charter schools in North Carolina from 1999 to 2012. Ladd et al. found students attending charter schools had higher test scores than students in traditional public schools over time but concluded that “the rising test score gains for charter schools over time is largely attributable to the changing mix of students they attract, rather than the quality of the programs they offer” (p. 23).

Berends (2015) examined research on the effects of charter schools on achievement and educational attainment and found “that charter schools do not fulfill the expectations for innovation when compared with traditional public schools” (p. 174). Scott and Villavicencio (2009) studied charter school research findings and discussed the difficulty of determining the true impact of charter schools on student achievement. Scott and Villavicencio said that three categories of the school environment help to explain the variance in student achievement in charter schools. Scott and Villavicencio’s framework considers “what schools (a) do, (b) have, and (c) know” (p. 233).

Sunsiri (2016) examined student achievement in 17 magnet schools and 12 charter schools in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district in North Carolina and used EOG and End-of-Course (EOC) tests and graduation rates to compare academic outcomes between magnet schools and charter schools. Sunsiri found that magnet schools had higher test scores and graduation rates than charter schools. Sunsiri also

found that charter schools had fewer licensed teachers and higher student-to-teacher ratios.

Zimmer et al. (2009), in their study of charter schools in five cities and three states, found that the achievement gains of students in charter schools were similar to the gains of students attending traditional public schools. They found that charter school students in Chicago had lower reading scores than students in traditional public schools and that charter school students in Texas had lower scores in reading and mathematics than their traditional public school counterparts. The researchers did not find any evidence that charter schools were negatively affecting student achievement in traditional public schools. They did find, however, that charter school students in Florida and Chicago had a higher probability of 7-15 percentage points of earning a high school diploma and a probability of 8-10 percentage points of attending college.

Zimmer, Blanc, Gill, and Christman (2008) conducted a longitudinal study on the performance of charter school students in Philadelphia who had transferred from public schools to charter schools. They analyzed student scores in reading and mathematics and found that student achievement gains in charter schools were indistinguishable from what their gains would have been if they had remained in the traditional public school.

Two studies on student choice in private schools found mixed results in student achievement. Egalite and Wolf (2016) analyzed data on 45 private school choice programs in 23 states and the District of Columbia. Forty-one, or 85%, of these programs were available to low-income students, students with disabilities, or students whose previous school was low performing. Egalite and Wolf analyzed 13 studies on the impact on student achievement and found that in five studies, student achievement was positive

for all students; in five studies, student achievement was positive for subgroups; in two studies, there was no discernible impact; and in one study, there was a negative effect. Egalite and Wolf also looked at the effect of competition from the private school choice program on the public schools in the neighborhood. Egalite and Wolf found that in 20 of 21 cases, there was a positive effect on student test scores for students in the neighborhood school.

Witte (1996), the independent evaluator of the Milwaukee choice program which provided funds (in the form of vouchers) for low-income students to attend a private school, found that although student achievement scores varied during the 3 years of the choice program, students in the choice program did not do better than students in the public schools. The attrition rate was high with approximately 33% of the students not returning after the first year in the choice program. Witte concluded that “wider choice and parental enthusiasm have not yet led to more effective schools” (p. 136) and said that researchers “need to examine this odd paradox whereby choice creates enormous enthusiasm among parents and private educators---but student achievement fails to rise” (p. 136).

### **School Choice and Diversity**

With the growth of school choice and the increase in the number of students exiting traditional public schools, it is critical to examine the impact of choice on diversity and to determine if stratification by race or socioeconomics occurs as a result of greater school choice. One of the original goals of magnet schools was to provide a means to desegregate schools voluntarily (Education Amendments of 1972). From the inception of MSAP, grant applicants are required to show that if their proposals are

funded, racial isolation will be reduced at the schools in the grant, racial isolation will not be negatively impacted at the non-magnet schools, and innovative programs will be implemented.

In examining diversity in magnet schools and charter schools, researchers have found mixed results in studies about the effects of choice. Blazer (2012) found that magnet schools attract a more diverse population and reduce isolation. Betts et al. (2015) found that diversity changed in the desired direction in their study of magnet schools that had received MSAP funds. Fleming (2012) described the evolving role of magnet schools and cited examples of ways school districts are using magnet schools as a strategy for school improvement and at the same time giving parents choices for public schools. Striving to achieve diversity and student achievement without using race, districts have used magnet schools effectively to diversify schools and raise student performance.

T. M. Davis (2014) looked at a national sample to determine whether or not magnet schools and classrooms in magnet schools were more segregated than traditional public schools and classrooms in traditional public schools. Results revealed that magnet schools do not lead to increased segregation of minority students at either the building level or the classroom level. T. M. Davis (2014) found that magnet schools were successful to a limited degree at integrating minority students at the classroom level (p. 423).

Charter schools are not required to reduce racial isolation; and, in fact, many charter schools are racially identifiable. Betts and Loveless (2005) studied charter schools in Michigan and found that charter schools have a disproportionate number of



minority students and can potentially increase segregation. Scott and Villavicencio (2009) examined student racial composition in charter schools and found that 70% of the African-Americans who attend charter schools attend schools that are majority African-American. Scott and Villavicencio emphasized the fact there is no incentive or requirement that charter schools have diverse student populations.

Using the CCD from NCES, Dee and Fu (2004) compared the racial and ethnic composition of students in Arizona from 1994-1995, the last year before charter schools started, and 1999-2000. They found that the percentage of White, non-Hispanic students in traditional public schools had been reduced by 2% and that the student-teacher ratio increased by 6% after charter schools began in Arizona. In their North Carolina study, Ladd et al. (2015) also found a reduction in the percentage of White students in traditional public schools and an increase in the percentage of White students in charter schools. Ladd et al. found that charter schools in North Carolina serve a disproportionate smaller number of minority students. Ladd et al. found that “most charter schools are racially imbalanced either predominately white (less than 20 percent non-white) or predominately minority (more than 80 percent non-white)” (p. 10).

Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley (2013) described the federal support for charter schools and provide information about the current status of charter schools in the U.S. Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley (2013) stated that 60% of charter school students attend predominately minority schools and 36% of charter school students are in schools where 90-100% of the students are from minority backgrounds. Since charter schools often do not provide transportation, free or reduced lunch, or services for special education, many families are not able to choose a charter school. Charter schools do not have to adhere to

a requirement to enroll a diverse student body. Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley (2013) called for state lawmakers to make changes in charter school policy “to make sure they (charter schools) support efforts to create diverse schools” (p. 141).

Several researchers have considered the effects of controlled choice and uncontrolled choice on student achievement and investigated choice proponents’ claims that unregulated choice programs result in increased student achievement. Cobb and Glass (2009) examined this claim and analyzed research findings on school choice programs with a specific focus on regulated choice and unregulated choice. Cobb and Glass found that choice programs that are unregulated result in stratification of students, whereas regulated choice programs could prevent stratification. Cobb and Glass did not find evidence to support the claim of proponents of unregulated choice programs that student achievement is increased. Cobb and Glass emphasized the benefits of regulated choice programs and put forth the case for integration.

Similar to Cobb and Glass’s (2009) findings, Saporito (2003) found that White families avoid choosing schools with a high percentage of non-White students and that wealthier families avoid schools with high poverty rates and that these choices lead to high segregation in the neighborhood school. Saporito found that “African Americans and whites have different preferences and that whites as a group, are particularly sensitive to neighborhood racial composition” (p. 183). Saporito concluded that “programs that allow the unfettered movement of children across schools will exacerbate existing race and class-based segregation in traditional, local neighborhood schools that children leave, further deteriorating the educational conditions faced by the most disadvantaged students” (p. 198). Saporito stated that her findings “provide no empirical support for

arguments that unfettered school choice policies will reduce segregation by race and class; in fact, they substantiate claims that unrestricted school choice increases segregation of both types” (p. 199).

Billingham and Hunt (2016) designed a survey to assess respondents’ likelihood of choosing a hypothetical school based on the racial composition of the student body and characteristics of the school including level of security, need for renovations, and the school’s rank in academic performance. The researchers found that as the proportion of Black students in the student body increased, White parents were less likely to enroll their children. Billingham and Hunt found that race matters a great deal in school choice and pointed out the difficulty school districts face in light of court rulings that limit their ability to use race in school assignment.

Henig (1995) analyzed 450 parent requests for transfers to 14 elementary magnet schools in Montgomery County, Maryland. Henig’s study showed that White parents tended to request transfers to schools with a lower percentage of minority students, and minority parents tended to request transfers to schools with a higher percentage of minority students. Henig theorized that both White and minority parents want their children to attend schools where they are not racially isolated. Henig concluded that giving parents a choice of schools might result in increasing segregation.

Ni (2010) used 2 consecutive years of data from elementary and middle schools in Michigan in his study to determine if sorting occurred when students in traditional public schools transferred to charter schools and when charter school students transferred to traditional public schools. Ni found that “the two-way transfer analysis shows that the student sorting under the charter school program tends to intensify the isolation of

disadvantaged students in less effective urban schools serving a high concentration of similarly disadvantaged students” (p. 217). Ni found that “black students were more likely to transfer to a charter school” (p. 228), that “low income students were less likely to transfer to charter schools” (p. 229), and that “students’ probability of transfer increased as the share of students of color in their school increased” (p. 232). Ni also found that students were more likely to transfer from a charter school back to a traditional public school if the charter school was of low effectiveness and of small size (p. 236). Ni’s analysis “suggests that charter schools lead to intensified stratification by race and SES in urban areas, where the students were already least well served by traditional public schools” (p. 238).

Smrekar (2009) examined the reason magnet schools in Nashville, Tennessee became predominately African-American after the school district received unitary status. With the end of court-ordered desegregation and the *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007) Supreme Court decision which limited the use of race in student assignment and choice plans, schools began to resegregate. Smrekar interviewed parents, teachers, and directors of the magnet school office and looked at parent choice patterns. Smrekar found that when the school reaches the “tipping point” of 40% or higher minority, then possible “white flight” (p. 216) occurs.

Using data from 2009-2010, Carlson (2014) analyzed the impact of interdistrict enrollment on stratification for Colorado students. At the time of the study, there were over 68,000 students, 8.1% of Colorado’s K-12 public school students, attending a school outside their district. Carlson found that there was “a decrease in racial/ethnic stratification, a slight increase in socioeconomic stratification, and no meaningful effect

on academic stratification” (p. 298). Carlson found that stratification was decreased when participants in the open enrollment interdistrict choice program were disproportionately low achieving or when low- and high-achieving students were equally likely to participate.

Archbald (1988) studied a large national sample (155 of the largest school districts) to determine whether segregation increased in districts with magnet schools. Archbald found that districts with magnet schools were not more segregated. Archbald expressed his belief that because of the segregation that exists in neighborhoods, large districts often have difficulty reducing minority isolation.

Frankenberg, Kotok, Schafft, and Mann (2017) examined student transfers from traditional public schools to charter schools in 2010-2011 to determine whether student choice resulted in greater segregation. This Pennsylvania study examined student transfers in 10 school districts and found that Black and Latino students moved to charter schools that were more segregated than the previous public schools they attended. The results for White students were mixed, with White students generally transferring to charter schools which had the approximate same percentage of White students as their previous traditional public school.

In an examination of segregation in charter schools, Frankenberg et al. (2011) found “that charter schools are more racially isolated than traditional public schools in virtually every state and large metropolitan area in the nation” (p. 2). Frankenberg et al. found “that charter schools isolate students by race and class” (p. 46) and “that charter schools fail to fulfill their integrative potential in most areas of the country” (p. 46).

The focus of a study by Weiher and Tedin (2002) was to determine whether

choosers of charter schools choose schools on the basis of race. Weiher and Tedin conducted interviews with 1,006 charter school parents in Texas and concluded, “that charter school choice in Texas increases the racial stratification of schools” (p. 80).

Siegel-Hawley and Frankenberg (2013) examined the changing demographics that resulted from court decisions and the growth of charter schools with the consequence that more magnet schools are experiencing increases in racial isolation. Siegel-Hawley and Frankenberg (2013) stated that magnet schools “when carefully designed, continue to offer a critical example of school choice used to promote diversity” (p. 108). The researchers expressed concern about the decline in an emphasis on desegregation goals and the urgent need to address the increase in segregation that is occurring.

In a study of Montgomery County’s magnet program, Fuller (1995) found that interest was low and did little to positively affect integration. Parents chose schools in close proximity that were of similar racial composition. Fuller concluded that unless efforts are made to ensure all families have information on the choice programs, “school choice will likely exacerbate inequities in educational opportunity” (p. 7).

Garcia (2007) conducted a study of charter school choosers in Grades 2-9 in Arizona who exited public schools to attend a charter school. Garcia compared racial/ethnic characteristics of students in charter schools to the district public schools they left to determine if school choice resulted in racial segregation. Garcia found that both elementary and high school students leave public schools to attend charter schools that are more segregated. White students left district schools with an average of 30% minority students to attend charter schools with 18% minority. Garcia concluded, “When students exit a district school to enter a charter school, they choose to enter more

segregated school environments than the ones they left” (p. 826).

### **School Choice and Parent Satisfaction**

A number of studies have examined the effect of school choice on parent satisfaction with their school and have found that parents who have exercised school choice are more satisfied (Bielick & Chapman, 2003; Cook 2009). Witte (1996) found that choice parents are more involved in their chosen schools.

Bielick and Chapman (2003) analyzed information on the NHES program for the years 1993, 1996, and 1999. Parents of students in Grades 3-12 were asked about their satisfaction with the schools their children attended. Specific areas addressed were the school, teachers, academics, and order and discipline. The analysis showed that parents whose children attended a school they had chosen were more satisfied than those parents whose children attended their assigned school. Bielick and Chapman found that parents whose children attended private schools were more involved than parents of either public assigned or public chosen schools. Bielick and Chapman also found that the percentage of students who attended their assigned school decreased from 80% in 1993 to 76% in 1999. In those years, there was an increase from 11% to 14% in public chosen schools.

Cook (2009) surveyed parents of second and sixth graders and conducted interviews in two school districts to determine whether parents who received their first choice of a magnet school were more satisfied than those who had to choose an alternative assignment. Cook found that parents who received their first choice of school were more satisfied than those who did not. Witte (1996) found that choice parents who participated in the Milwaukee choice program were more involved and more satisfied than they had been in their previous school. Ogawa and Dutton (1994) found that parent

satisfaction is initially improved with choice but may decrease with length of time in the choice school.

Dickson (2000) examined parent satisfaction with six factors: staff quality, school environment, curriculum and instruction, school location, the school day, and parent participation. Dickson also examined whether there was a relationship between parental satisfaction and length of time in the school. Five hundred twenty-three parents of students in kindergarten through 12th grade responded to 18 questions (three questions per factor) in a telephone survey. Interviewers also asked parents two open-ended questions in which they were asked to state what they found most and least satisfying about the choice program. Thirty-eight percent said having a choice was the most satisfying, and 17% said not having transportation was the least satisfying.

Hausman and Goldring (2000) found that parent income was not related to satisfaction and that magnet school parents were highly satisfied with their school. Hausman and Goldring found that “parents who reported choosing for values reasons and academic reasons reported higher levels of satisfaction, while those parents who chose for reasons of convenience indicated lower levels of satisfaction with their magnet school” (p. 109).

Friedman, Bobrowski, and Markow (2007) surveyed parents in 121 schools in 27 school districts in their examination of the factors that predict parent satisfaction with schools. Friedman et al. found that three factors—parent communication and involvement, school resources, and quality of leadership and management of budget—accounted for 63% of the variance. Friedman et al. recommended that school administrators determine the areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction and address those



areas where parents are dissatisfied in order to improve the overall satisfaction with the school.

Wohlstetter, Nayfack, and Mora-Flores (2008) developed a parent survey for charter schools to use to determine parent satisfaction and to analyze the data collected from the survey. The survey used a 4-point Likert scale and asked about parent satisfaction in six areas: school environment, academic program, school culture, school support services, teachers, and administrators. Wohlstetter et al. surveyed charter schools in California and grouped the schools by new charters, emerging charters, and mature charters. Ninety percent of the parents surveyed gave high marks to all six factors of the school experience, with the academic program receiving the highest rating. Parents were least satisfied with the school environment, especially school cleanliness and physical condition of the school.

A study by Schneider et al. (1997) compared parent behavior in four schools in two school districts. The schools were matched pairs in which parents in one of the schools had chosen the school and in the other school, children were assigned. The researchers interviewed 400 parents in each district—two schools in New York, and schools in Morristown and Montclair, New Jersey. Schneider et al. found that “the act of school choice seems to stimulate parents to become more involved in a wide range of school-related activities that build social capital” (p. 91). Schneider et al. concluded that giving parents greater choice in schools results in parents becoming better citizens; and thus, social capital increases.

### **Studies of Parent Preferences**

With the increase in the number and variety of school choices, researchers have

conducted studies to learn about parent preferences and to determine the factors that influence parent school choice and the process parents use in determining where their children will attend school (Algozzine, Yon, & Nesbit, 1999; Altenhofen, Berends, & White 2016; Bell, 2009; Bosetti, 2004; Hastings, Kane, & Staiger, 2007; Hastings, Weelden, & Weinstein, 2007; Henig, 1995). Researchers have asked questions such as what are the important factors parents consider as they examine the alternatives for schooling; how do parents decide where their children will attend school; on what basis do they decide which school to choose; and do they make decisions on a rational basis or are there other influences on their decision-making process?

Researchers typically use telephone and web-based surveys and interviews in their studies of parent preferences. The quality of the academic program is frequently cited as the most important factor influencing parent school choice; although factors such as quality teachers, convenience, and safety are also given as reasons for their school choice (Hausman & Goldring 2000; McNally, 2002).

Algozzine et al. (1999) studied 250 surveys of parent perceptions of a magnet elementary school in North Carolina during its second year of operation and interviewed 25 parents by telephone. The researchers asked questions about the reasons for choosing a magnet school, the benefits of the magnet program, and whether there were changes in student behavior as a result of transferring to a magnet school. The top three reasons of parents for choosing a magnet school were academic focus, convenience, and dissatisfaction with the previous school. Criticisms of the magnet school included a lack of feeling of community and concerns related to the newness of the magnet school. Some parents felt there was too much homework and the work was too difficult. Most parents

indicated students were enjoying school and were motivated to learn.

Altenhofen et al. (2016) examined factors influencing high-income parents to choose a charter school. The researchers interviewed 500 parents who had chosen one of six charter schools in four school districts in Colorado. Using both closed and open-ended survey questions, they asked parents to assess 18 reasons for applying to a charter school. Parents mentioned the academic quality, good teachers, safety, small class size, and well-disciplined students as important reasons for applying. Other factors mentioned were the push of the traditional public school, the pull of the charter school, and academic quality. Some families said proximity to the school was important. This study confirmed the importance of social networks in school choice. Over 50% of the parents mentioned they had used their social networks in their school choice search.

Olson Beal and Hendry (2012) conducted a 1-year case study in 2006-2007 in an elementary magnet school which offered a foreign language immersion program in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Olson Beal and Hendry conducted observations and interviewed parents about their experience in choosing a school and the criteria they used to select the school. Olson Beal and Hendry found that the choice process school districts use may inhibit all parents of having equal access. Like Altenhofen et al. (2016), the researchers found that parents did not make their choice of the school on objective, rational information but tended to rely on informal networks.

Anderson (2003) examined the factors influencing school choice of African-American parents of children who were entering kindergarten in Montclair, New Jersey, in choosing one of six magnet schools in the district. Montclair is a unique school district with the entire school district consisting of magnet schools. Since 1985, all parents in the

district must make a school choice. Anderson found that African-American parents want a balance of a quality academic program and a caring environment for their children. Parents ranked both instructional and noninstructional factors as important reasons for their selection of a magnet school.

Anemone (2008) examined parental choice by parents of fifth-grade students entering middle school in the Montclair magnet school district. Parents rated factors they considered important in their selection of one of the three magnet middle schools in the district. The quality of the teaching staff received the highest ranking; with magnet theme, quality of the administration, and the overall perception of the school as other important factors in parent school decisions.

In an early study of parent reasons for selecting a senior high performing magnet school in Philadelphia, Comerford (1980) surveyed parents and found that “the uniqueness of the curriculum, safety in the school building, safety in the school neighborhood, and the school staff were very important to parents” (p. 8) and that building attractiveness was relatively unimportant. When asked if they would have sent their child to the school if it were predominately White or predominately Black, there was a significant difference in the responses of White and Black parents. Only 65.5% of the White parents indicated they would send their child to the school if it were predominately Black, whereas 97% of all parents said they would send their child to the school if the student body were predominately White. Comerford found that the student body at the magnet school was representative of the district student population.

Cook (2009) found that parents used factors such as their perception of teacher quality, peer relations, safety, location, and extracurricular activities to make their choice

of school. Cook found that parent age, gender, and ethnicity did not influence their choice.

In a Texas study, Berry (2017) examined the reasons parents chose a school-within-a-school program. The researcher used Belmar and Deal's (2013) framework of four categories—Structure, Human Resource, Symbolic, and Political—to organize the reasons. Two hundred fifty-nine parents completed the 14-question online survey. Questions included the ease of finding information, the enrollment/registration process, and the level of satisfaction with the school choice. Berry found that organizational structure which included large class size, school size, discipline, and transportation was the most frequent reason for leaving the neighborhood school followed by the Political which included academic quality, lack of diversity, and location.

In a study in England, Burgess, Greaves, Vignoles, and Wilson (2014) examined survey data and demographics to learn about parent preferences for school attributes, the impact of the racial makeup of the student body, and the distance from the school on school choice. The most important factor in school choice was academics. Close proximity to the school was also important, and parents indicated they preferred a school with a low percentage of low-income students.

Using a stratified random sample, Fish (1997) examined reasons parents chose to participate in a choice program or a magnet school in the Long Beach Unified School District. Fish conducted face-to-face interviews with principals, and parents participated in a telephone survey. Parents were given eight suggested reasons for their school choice and asked to rank all those that applied. The top three rankings were the special academic programs, safe school, and better academic programs. All of the principals

interviewed agreed that their school was a better place because of the choice program.

In their study of private school choice, Goldring and Phillips (2008) used survey data from parents in the Nashville Public Schools to determine the factors that impacted parent choice of a private school. They found that parents who chose private schools believed they would have more opportunities for parent involvement and increased communication. The researchers found no evidence that parents who chose private schools did so because of dissatisfaction with the public schools.

Hausman and Goldring (2000) surveyed fifth-grade parents in 18 magnet elementary schools in two urban school districts to determine their reasons for selecting a magnet school. The three main reasons parents gave for choosing a magnet school were academics, values, and discipline/safety. Parents ranked proximity and transportation much lower than the other factors. Magnet school parents who chose on the basis of their values were more likely to be involved with the school.

McNally (2002) studied the factors that parents in 16 communities in Connecticut considered important in choosing whether or not their children attended a magnet school. McNally discussed the situation of racial isolation and inequity that existed in the state as reasons for the legislature to implement magnet schools as a means to address the “two Connecticuts” (p. 1). McNally surveyed parents of elementary school students whose children currently attended a magnet school and parents who potentially could send their children to a magnet school under development. Findings indicated that school and class size, safe environment, quality teachers and administrators, and diversity were important factors for parents when choosing a magnet school.

In the 47th Annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes about the Public

Schools (2015), parents were asked to rank 11 factors in their school choice. Findings indicated that

Public school parents believe the three most important factors in choosing a local public school include the quality of the teachers, the curriculum (i.e. the courses offered), and the maintenance of student discipline. The three least important factors are the proximity of the school to the workplace, the success of the athletic program, and student achievement as measured by standardized tests. (p. K18)

Smrekar and Honey (2015) sought to understand parent preferences and determine if the location of the magnet school played a role in parent decision-making. The researchers interviewed district leaders in four school districts (Clark County, Nevada; Hamilton County, Tennessee; Montgomery County, Maryland; and Wake County, North Carolina) and studied demographics and student performance reports. The researchers found “that parents are most attracted to schools with distinctive programs situated in familiar (to the parent) neighborhoods” (Smrekar & Honey, 2015, p. 134). Smrekar and Honey concluded “that the racial and social composition of schools are primary considerations in parents’ choice sets” (p. 142). Smrekar and Honey suggested that districts could strategically locate magnet schools to impact equity and diversity.

Some researchers have found that what parents say were the important factors in their school choice are often different from the actions they take in making a choice. Researchers suggest that parents may provide what they believe to be a socially acceptable answer rather than provide the real reason for their school choice.

Schneider and Buckley (2002) monitored an Internet site that provided

information about schools in the District of Columbia and were able to determine the behaviors of parents as they searched for schools. Schneider and Buckley found that although parents might indicate in surveys that demographics were not an important factor, when using the Internet, parents first looked at the demographics and the location of the school, thus indicating “that race is fundamentally important to them” (p. 17). Parents eliminated schools with a high percent of minority students from their initial search and then examined the remaining schools more closely in the process of choosing a school.

In a study by Weiher and Tedin (2002), parents were asked to choose from six factors in identifying their reasons for their school choice. The researchers found differences in preferences by race and class and between parents’ stated reasons for choice and their actual choice behavior. White parents chose test scores as their most important reason, Black parents chose the teaching of moral values, and Hispanic parents chose discipline. Weiher and Tedin found that race was a predictor of the school students attended. Although parents did not indicate race was an important factor in their reasons for school choice, an analysis of the actual choice parents made revealed that parents chose a school with a higher percentage of students of their race. Betts et al. (2015) concluded that the success of the choice system depends on parents making good choices of schools; however, the researchers expressed concern that parents may be giving socially acceptable responses and may not be providing truthful responses when surveyed about their reasons for choosing.

Using an online survey, Wespieser et al. (2015) surveyed 1,005 parents of children aged 5-18 in England in 2014-2015. All parents indicated the location of the



school and having a school that was a good fit for their child were the most important reasons for their school choice. Parents of higher household incomes indicated that discipline, exam results, and leadership were important. Parents with low household incomes indicated location, well-qualified teachers, and community links were important.

Ogawa and Dutton (1994) described five assumptions underlying parent choice: (a) parents will make informed choices in selecting schools for their children; (b) schools will respond to parent preferences; (c) students, teachers, and parents will be more highly motivated; (d) educational outcomes will improve; and (e) parent choice will reduce educational costs (p. 275). To determine if there is evidence to support the assumptions, the researchers examined four choice programs—magnet schools, charter schools, interdistrict transfers, and private/public vouchers—and the amount of control given to parents and professionals. Ogawa and Dutton found that parents use different criteria in choosing schools and parents will choose on the basis of nonacademic factors such as convenience and proximity. Ogawa and Dutton found that choice does not result in greater responsiveness to parents but found some evidence that parents who exercise choice are more involved in their child's school. Ogawa and Dutton concluded that the research does not support the assumption that academic performance improves with choice. Ogawa and Dutton concluded, “our understanding of educational choice as a strategy for reforming and improving education is inconclusive and incomplete” (p. 292).

Several researchers found that the social class of parents makes a difference in how they determine a school choice. Bell (2009) theorized that parents from different social classes use different “choice sets” to make decisions about school choice. The

researcher conducted a longitudinal study in a Midwestern city and found that middle class parents and poor and working class parents had different choice sets. This difference provides a rationale for why parents would choose failing schools. The differences in social networks, attendance zones, and views of academic achievement resulted in different choices of schools.

Villavicencio (2013) interviewed parents in two charter schools and, like Bell (2009), found that choice sets are different for parents from different social classes. Villavicencio challenged the assumption that if schools followed a market model, the schools would improve because of competition and that unsuccessful schools would be forced to get better or close. Villavicencio also challenged the assumption that parents would choose a high performing charter school if given a choice and would leave schools that had low student achievement. Villavicencio found that parents choose schools for different reasons, not all of which are academic. Villavicencio also found that not all parents have the same number of options and not all parents can choose to leave a school even though they are dissatisfied.

Hastings et al. (2007) examined parent preferences for their top three choices of schools in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School district in the 2001-2002 school year, the first year of the school choice program. Researchers found that as parent income increases, their preference for schools with higher academic ratings increases. Parents who ranked proximity lower had a higher preference for high test scores.

### **The Process of Selecting a School**

Researchers have studied the process by which parents choose a school. Henig (1995) analyzed parent surveys and concluded that if parents do not have information

about the specific benefits of a school for their child, they will use factors such as convenience, word of mouth, and concerns about their child's social acceptance to make their school decisions.

In the 1995 policy brief from the National Conference of State Legislatures, Fuller (1995) presented information about the rise of school choice programs and discussed the use of vouchers in San Antonio and Milwaukee and magnet schools in Montgomery County, Maryland. Fuller compared choosers and non-choosers in San Antonio and found that parents who chose vouchers had higher incomes and higher expectations of achievement for their children. Fuller described how the selection process contributed to the inequity.

The voucher program in Milwaukee serves low-income children. As in the study of the San Antonio program, the parents of participants were found to have higher levels of education. Parents reported satisfaction with the program although student achievement results did not show increased learning occurred. Integration of the schools was negatively impacted.

Fuller's (1995) study of Montgomery County's magnet program found that interest was low and did little to positively affect integration. Parents chose schools in close proximity that were of similar racial composition. Fuller concluded that unless efforts are made to ensure all families have information on the choice programs, "school choice will likely exacerbate inequities in educational opportunity" (p. 7).

Hastings et al. (2007) examined the relationship between receiving information about school test scores, the odds of acceptance, and parent choice behavior in the Charlotte Mecklenburg School district. Some low-income parents whose children

attended a school which did not meet No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements received an information sheet about available schools along with their choice form. Another group of parents received information listing both test scores and the odds of being accepted at each school. Higher income parents also received information with test scores and the odds of being accepted.

Results showed that parents who received information on just test scores chose a higher ranked school. When information was included about the odds of being accepted at the school, higher income parents chose slightly lower ranked schools in which the odds of admission were greater. In looking at what drives parent choice behavior, the researchers concluded that having information on academics increases the likelihood that low-income parents will choose a school with higher test scores.

André-Bechely (2005) spent 2 years studying the process parents used to choose a magnet school. This ethnographic study focused on 13 parents and the process they used to choose a magnet school. The researcher used the term “choice work” to describe the specific strategies the parents used to get their child into a magnet school. André-Bechely found that the system that is set up to handle parent choice of schools does not treat all parents equally, and low-income parents did not have the same access to the schools as parents in the middle class. The study pointed out the inequalities in the choice system.

Bosetti (2004) surveyed 1,500 parents in 29 elementary schools in Alberta, Canada, and also conducted a follow-up with focus groups to determine the sources of information parents used and the factors that were important in selecting a school. Bosetti found that public school parents relied on their social networks, teachers, and

school visits. They were least likely to consider achievement scores or formal sources of information. Alternative school parents considered achievement scores and consulted with their children and other children to gain information. Religious private school parents considered religious beliefs, family, and media reports. These parents were least likely to consult with their child. Non-religious private school parents consulted with school personnel and their social networks and made school visits.

Parents in this study were given 22 factors to select from and to rank. Private school parents ranked small class size, shared values and beliefs, teaching style, and strong academic reputation as the most important. Fifty percent of public school parents chose proximity to their home as their top choice, followed by academic reputation, teachers, principals, and teaching style. Alternative school parents ranked strong academic reputation, teaching style, special programs offered, and shared values and beliefs. Religious private school parents ranked shared values and beliefs and a strong academic reputation. Bosetti (2004) stated, “given that social networks appear to play a critical role in informing parental decision-making, this raises concerns regarding the accuracy and quality of information parents access through these networks” (p. 395).

Hamilton and Gunn (2005) described the conditions under which parents can make good decisions about school choice. These include knowing what their preferences are; collecting the information about the schools that are available; being able to compare and contrast the attributes of the school; and then, after deciding what matters most, choosing a school. The researchers pointed out that parent preferences may vary by race and socioeconomic background. Hamilton and Gunn found that although parents state that academic quality is the reason for their choice, they might actually choose a school in

which their children will be in the racial majority. Hamilton and Gunn indicated that the type of information parents will use to learn about schools depends on their race and level of education. The researchers provided several guidelines to use for improving the information available to parents and recommended that school districts find ways to let parents provide feedback to the schools, so they will know what they need to improve.

Although previous studies have examined the influences on parent school choice, there is a need for additional research in urban school districts. The study contributed to the knowledge of school choice by expanding understanding of the factors influencing school choice of a magnet school in a large urban school district. The purpose of this study was to determine the sources of information parents use in making the decision to consider a magnet school, the factors that influence parent decisions to apply to a magnet school in a large urban school district, and the factors that influence parent decisions to choose a magnet school rather than a charter school or a private school.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter describes the research design of this mixed-methods study and the statistical analysis conducted. Included is a description of the participants in the study, how they were selected, the instruments and methods which were used to collect information from the participants, and the process used to analyze the results of the study. The purpose of the study was to determine the sources of information parents use when making the decision to consider a magnet school; to determine the factors that influence their choice of a magnet school in a large urban school district; and, if parents considered a charter or a private school, to determine the factors that influence parents to choose a magnet school.

In examining how parents make a school choice, the researcher looked for evidence to determine whether parents are rational consumers who objectively and carefully analyze the costs and benefits of their school decision, as proponents of rational choice theory would suggest, or if parents make their school choice decision more subjectively using nonacademic reasons such as convenience or proximity. By studying the sources of information parents use and the factors that impact their choice of a magnet school, the researcher gained knowledge about information parents value and the influences on them when they make a school choice. The school district can use this information to improve both traditional public schools and magnet schools.

In deciding on the design of the study, the researcher considered several possible designs and concluded that the selected mixed methods research design would result in the best method for providing answers to the three research questions outlined in the first chapter of this dissertation. As explained by Creswell (2014), mixed-methods design

combines quantitative and qualitative research and data (p. 14). The particular mixed-methods design selected for this research study is the convergent parallel mixed methods.

Creswell described this method as

a form of mixed methods design in which the researcher converges or merges quantitative and qualitative data in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem. In this design, the investigator typically collects both forms of data at roughly the same time and then integrates the information in the interpretation of the overall results. (p. 15)

One type of quantitative design which enables the researcher to collect quantitative information is survey research. Creswell (2014) stated that the purpose of survey research “is to generalize from a sample to a population so that inferences can be made about some characteristic, attitude, or behavior of this population” (p. 157). Fowler (2009) stated that “the purpose of the survey is to produce statistics, that is quantitative or numerical descriptions about some aspects of the study population” (p. 1). Fowler stated that in using a survey, the researcher will make inferences about the target population based on the responses of the sample population. Fowler cautioned about the potential of error occurring in survey research including error arising from bias, sample selection, and respondents not responding truthfully to the questions.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016), in discussing qualitative design, pointed out that “research designs are based on different assumptions about what is being investigated, and they seek to answer different questions ... in the case of qualitative research, understanding is the primary rationale for the investigation” (p. 238). Merriam and Tisdell also pointed out,



In this type of research it is important to understand the perspectives of those involved in the phenomenon of interest, to uncover the complexity of human behavior in a contextual framework, and to present a holistic interpretation of what is happening. (p. 244)

The purpose of the research study was to understand the perspectives of parents who choose magnet schools and to understand the sources of information and factors that influence parent choice of a magnet school. By collecting both quantitative data and qualitative data, the researcher believes that the result is a more comprehensive perspective of parent choice of a magnet school, and thus, a mixed methods research study was the best method to achieve this understanding. In particular, the study was designed to answer these three research questions:

1. What sources of information do parents use in making the decision to consider a magnet school?
2. What factors influence parent decisions to apply to a magnet school for their children?
3. What factors influence parent decisions to choose a magnet school rather than a charter or a private school?

### **The Research Sample**

Participants in this study are parents who submitted an application for their children to attend a magnet school or an early college in a large urban school district in the 2018-2019 school year. Participants submitted an application between January 10 and February 4, 2018. Participating parents applied for their children to attend one or more of the 46 magnet schools and six early colleges in the district. Parents had a 3-week

window of time to submit their online application. (Because schools were closed due to snow, the deadline for applying was extended 4 days.) Applications could only be submitted online. No paper applications were permitted. The application required parents to provide basic demographic information including the name of the parent and student and age and current address and to select up to five magnet schools or early colleges, ranking the choices if they had more than one choice. Prior to submitting an application, parents had to ensure their children had a student identification number.

Parents of incoming kindergarten children had to register their children at their base school in order to receive a student identification number. Without this student identification number, parents could not submit an application for their children to attend a magnet school. Students currently attending a school in the district had an identification number, and their parents would simply provide it on the application.

Parents who submitted a magnet school application were selected for this study and emailed the survey instrument. Because parents could only submit a magnet school application online, the district has the email addresses for all parents who submitted a magnet school application. All parents who applied for a magnet school were asked to complete the survey and participate in the study. The total number of magnet school and early college applications submitted was 5,183.

In order for magnet schools to continue to attract parents, an understanding of the sources of information they use in the decision-making process, the factors that influence their choice of a magnet school, and the factors that influence parents to choose a magnet school rather than a charter or a private school will provide valuable information to school districts. With information from parents about what they consider important when

making a school choice, school districts will have a better understanding of the nature of parent school choice and will be able to use this information to make changes and improvements in schools in the district.

### **Survey Instrument**

All parents who submitted an application for their children to attend a magnet school or early college were emailed a survey from the school district about the magnet school application experience. (The survey is provided in Appendix A.) The researcher was given permission from the school district to have access to the survey and to analyze the results. The survey was selected because it contains questions that will provide answers to the three research questions. The researcher analyzed the survey questions that align with the three research questions.

The survey has been used in previous years by the school district and was modified in consultation with district staff and the researcher. The survey contains 17 questions and asks respondents to respond to questions about the process of considering a magnet school and deciding to submit an application. For example, respondents are asked to indicate if they participated in magnet school events such as school visits and tours and to rate the quality of the school visits and tours. The survey asks parents to indicate the influence of seven sources of information such as the school website, personal recommendations from friends or former students, and school test score data on their choice of the specific schools to visit. The survey uses a Likert scale, and parents are asked to indicate if each source of information was very influential, somewhat influential, or not influential.

Parents were asked to indicate the importance of nine factors such as magnet program theme, school reputation, diversity, and distance to the school on their decision to apply for a magnet school. Parents were asked to rank each factor using a Likert scale and indicate if the factor was very important, somewhat important, or not important in choosing a magnet school.

In addition, parents were asked to respond to four open-ended questions on the survey. These questions asked respondents to suggest other innovative themes or programs that would appeal to them; to describe an experience, conversation, or piece of information from their search that helped them make their choice of a magnet school; to share their observations and opinions about magnet programs; and, if they applied to a charter school or a private school, to explain the features of these schools that appealed to them. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and participants were assured of confidentiality. Completion of the survey was estimated to take between 5 and 10 minutes.

### **Focus Groups**

In order to gather additional information about magnet school selection, the researcher facilitated discussions with focus groups of parents of children who applied to a magnet school and whose children would be attending kindergarten in the 2018-2019 school year. The focus groups consisted of four to six adults who spent approximately one hour responding to the focus group questions. (The focus group questions are provided in Appendix B.) By listening to parents discuss their school choice, the researcher gained additional information and understanding and was able to construct a narrative of the process of making a school choice and, in particular, the choice of a

magnet school. The responses to the focus group questions provided additional information about the sources of information parents used in considering a magnet school; the factors influencing their school choice decision; and if they considered applying to a charter or private school, the reasons they chose a magnet school.

In the fall of 2017, the researcher conducted a pilot of the focus group questions with kindergarten parents from four magnet elementary schools. Along with a staff member from the Magnet and Curriculum Enhancement Programs office, the researcher facilitated focus groups with kindergarten parents who were attending an event such as Open House or a PTA meeting and who volunteered to participate in a focus group. In addition to the focus groups, all kindergarten parents attending the event were asked to complete a short survey asking them about the magnet school application process and the factors that were important to them in considering a magnet school. Responses to the survey and from parents who participated in the focus groups provided useful information about parent preferences. As a result of the pilot study, the researcher modified the questions to be asked of the focus group parents in the research study.

Only parents whose children were accepted to attend kindergarten in a magnet school participated in the focus groups in the research study. The schools were selected in consultation with the Director of Magnet and Curriculum Enhancement Programs. Twelve schools located primarily in the downtown area and in which there is minority group isolation and a significant percentage of high-poverty students were selected for the study. All parents of kindergarten students in the 12 schools were emailed and asked to participate in a focus group on one of several dates.

In the focus groups, participants were asked questions about the factors that

contributed to their decision to apply to a magnet school, their experience in selecting a magnet school, and the effectiveness of the sources of information they used in the selection process. They also were asked whether or not they considered applying to a charter school or a private school and, if so, the reasons they chose a magnet school.

Participation in the focus groups was voluntary, and participants were assured of confidentiality. The researcher obtained confidential agreements from the parents participating in the focus groups, and participants signed a confidentiality agreement. The focus group sessions were recorded, and responses transcribed. The transcripts of the focus groups were coded, common themes identified, and the data interpreted to determine if there were relationships among the themes.

### **Analysis of Data**

The purpose of this study was to determine the sources of information parents use when deciding to apply to a magnet school, the factors that influence their decision to apply to a magnet school in a large urban district, and the reasons for their decision to apply to a magnet school rather than a charter or a private school. An analysis of the survey data and the responses by focus group participants provide important information on the magnet school selection process and parent school choice decision-making.

The researcher compiled descriptive statistics, tables, and a narrative of the responses to the open-ended questions on the survey and a narrative of participant responses in the focus groups. Frequency distributions were compiled for the seven sources of information parents used and for the nine factors parents considered in their decision to apply to a magnet school. Detailed descriptions of the responses with quotations from the participants provide the rich, thick descriptions that Creswell (2014)

recommended in a qualitative study.

The researcher obtained permission from the participants to record the focus group sessions and to transfer the audiotapes to transcripts. Participants signed a confidentiality statement giving the researcher permission to use their comments. The transcripts were coded and analyzed for common themes and interpreted.

In conducting the analysis, the researcher followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) suggestions about data analysis involving coding, determining themes, and then interpreting them. Creswell and Poth (2018) conceptualized this task as a data analysis spiral. They describe data analysis in qualitative research as "coding the data (reducing the data into meaningful segments and assigning names for the segments), combining the codes into broader categories or themes, and displaying and making comparisons in the data graphs, tables, and charts" (pp. 183-184).

Creswell (2014) stated that coding is essential to creating an understanding of the central meaning of participant responses. Through the process of coding, determining essential themes, and interpreting them, the researcher was able to arrive at an understanding of the process of making a school choice and to provide rich descriptions that include quotations from the participants commenting on their experiences in the school decision-making process. The data analysis provides answers to the research questions.

Creswell (2014) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommended a number of strategies to use in analyzing qualitative data to ensure validity and reliability of the findings. One strategy Creswell and Merriam and Tisdell recommended is triangulation. In triangulating the data from the survey and from the focus groups, the researcher looked

for common themes in survey participant responses to the open-ended survey questions and in the focus group participant responses. Because there are similarities between several of the questions on the survey and the focus group questions, the expectation was that there would be similar themes in both data sources. Since this was the case, there is evidence of the trustworthiness and reliability of the findings.

Additional strategies the researcher used to increase validity were member checks and peer examination, strategies recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). After transcribing the data, the researcher asked members of the focus groups to read the researcher's interpretation of the meeting and verify that the interpretation "rings true." This "member checking" step enhances internal validity. In addition, to add to the validity, the researcher asked an independent person to review the responses to the open-ended questions and the transcripts of the focus groups and to validate the codes the researcher identified. A staff member in the Data, Research and Accountability department of the school district performed the peer evaluation, an important step in the process of data analysis. With the use of multiple strategies including triangulation, member checking, and peer evaluation, the researcher initiated specific methods to enhance validity.

Table 1 illustrates how the data from the survey and focus group questions were used to provide answers to the research questions. This table also shows the data analysis and the manner in which the data are presented.



Table 1

*Data Source, Data Analysis, Data Presentation for Research Questions*

Research Question	Data Source	Data Analysis	Data
1. What sources of information do parents use in making the decision to consider a magnet school?	Survey Question 3	Descriptive Statistics	Tables and charts, frequency table, mean average, percentages  Narrative discussing major themes
	Focus Group Questions 2 and 3	Qualitative	
2. What factors influence parent decisions to apply to a magnet school for their children?	Survey Question 9	Descriptive Statistics	Tables and charts, frequency table, mean average, percentages  Narrative discussing major themes
	Focus Group Question 4	Qualitative	
3. What factors influence parent decisions to choose a magnet school rather than a private school or a charter school?	Survey Questions 11 and 15	Descriptive Statistics	Tables and charts, frequency table, mean average, percentages  Narrative discussing major themes
	Focus Group Questions 5 and 6	Qualitative	

The researcher analyzed the data from the survey using descriptive statistics and created frequency tables and charts showing mean averages and percentages. The researcher also analyzed the data collected from the open-ended survey questions and the focus groups, coded the data, determined themes, and interpreted the findings. In writing about the findings, the researcher provides a written narrative discussing the major themes and interpretations and includes rich descriptions with quotations and examples from the open-ended results and the focus groups as recommended by Creswell (2014).

**Summary**

The magnet school program is essential to the success of this large urban school district. With increased competition for students from other school choices such as charter schools and private schools, it is critical to have information about the basis upon which parents make their school choice. This study provides both survey and focus group data to further an understanding of school choice, specifically, parent choice of a magnet school. The findings from this study provide the school district with an increased understanding of the sources of information parents use, the factors that influence their school choice, and their reasons for choosing a magnet school rather than a charter school or a private school. With this evidence, the district will be able to make appropriate changes to continue to attract parents to choose magnet schools for their children.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to determine the sources of information parents use in making the decision to consider a magnet school, the factors that influence parent decisions to apply to a magnet school in a large urban school district, and the factors that influence parent decisions to choose a magnet school rather than a charter or a private school. This study was designed to answer the following three research questions:

1. What sources of information do parents use in making the decision to consider a magnet school?
2. What factors influence parent decisions to apply to a magnet school for their children?
3. What factors influence parent decisions to choose a magnet school rather than a charter or a private school?

The researcher analyzed the results of a survey distributed by the school district to all those who applied to attend one of the 46 magnet schools or six early colleges in a large urban school district for the 2018-2019 school year. In addition to analyzing the survey results, the researcher facilitated three focus groups of kindergarten parents from magnet elementary schools located in the downtown area. Focus group participants were volunteers who met at the school district office and responded to seven questions about their magnet school search. Focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed. The researcher analyzed the transcripts, coded the responses, and looked for themes.

The survey contained 17 questions and asked parents about the process of applying to a magnet school or early college. Of particular interest to the researcher were

the survey questions about seven possible sources of information parents might have used in deciding to consider a magnet school; the importance of nine factors on their magnet school choice; and responses to four open-ended questions about topics such as significant influences from their school search that helped them choose a magnet school, their observations and opinions about magnet schools, and the features that appealed to them if they applied to a charter or private school. The survey results included both quantitative and qualitative data. In performing the analysis of the responses to the open-ended questions on the survey, the researcher began by reading each of the responses to the question, coded the responses, and then looked for themes.

### **Survey Responses**

Surveys were emailed to 5,183 applicants, and 984 surveys were returned for a response rate of 19%. Forty-four percent of the respondents indicated the applicant would be in elementary school, 34.76% indicated the applicant would be in middle school, and 27.12% indicated the applicant would be in high school.

### **Sources of Information**

Question 3 on the survey asked, “How influential were the following sources of information in your initial choice of particular magnet and/or Early College schools to visit?” Nine hundred seventy-eight respondents answered this question. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

*Influence of Sources of Information on School Choice*

Source of Information	Not Influential	Somewhat Influential	Very Influential	Total	Weighted Average
Personal recommendations from friends or former students	9.31% 89	23.95% 229	66.74% 638	956	2.57
School website	16.58% 159	48.91% 469	34.52% 331	959	2.18
School test score data	26.82% 251	41.99% 393	31.20% 292	936	2.04
Recommendations from staff member at your current school	43.71% 396	24.17% 219	32.12% 291	906	1.88
School brochure	35.40% 325	44.23% 406	20.37% 187	918	1.85
Magnet Explorer website tool	46.57% 428	32.32% 297	21.11% 194	919	1.75
Media stories of the school	47.50% 437	33.80% 311	18.70% 172	920	1.71

Survey results indicated that personal recommendations from friends or former students is the most influential source of information in the initial choice of a particular magnet school to visit. Weighted averages show that the second most influential source of information is the school website, followed by school test score data and recommendations from staff members at the current school. The ranking of sources of information differs slightly when only sources that were very influential are considered. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents indicated personal recommendations were very influential in their school choice. Thirty-five percent of respondents indicated the school

website was very influential, 32% indicated recommendations from staff members were very influential, and 31% indicated school test score data were very influential. The school brochure, Magnet Explorer website tool, and media stories of the school were the least influential sources of information.

### **Importance of Nine Factors on Decision to Apply to a Magnet School**

Question 9 on the survey asked respondents to “Please rate the importance of the following factors in your decision to apply to a particular magnet school or an early college?” Nine hundred seventy-eight respondents answered this question. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

#### *Importance of Selected Factors on Application Decision*

Factor	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Total	Weighted Average
Magnet Program Theme	2.16% 159	21.96% 213	75.88% 736	970	2.74
Impressions of the school leadership	3.02% 29	20.63% 198	76.35% 733	960	2.73
School reputation	2.17% 21	23.53% 228	74.30% 720	969	2.72
Diversity	8.57% 83	34.26% 332	57.17% 554	969	2.49
School assignment stability	19.37% 184	38.21% 363	42.42% 403	950	2.23
Distance to the school	19.79% 190	42.50% 408	37.71% 362	960	2.18
Pathway to a preferred magnet middle and/or high school	27.21% 256	30.92% 291	41.87% 394	941	2.15
Opportunities for parental involvement	22.69% 216	42.75% 407	34.56% 329	952	2.12
Dissatisfaction with base/calendar options	30.79% 294	32.25% 308	36.96% 353	955	2.06

Survey results using weighted averages indicate that the magnet theme, impressions of the school leadership, and school reputation are the three most important factors in the decision to apply to a magnet program. The three least important factors using weighted averages are dissatisfaction with base/calendar options, opportunities for parental involvement, and pathway to a preferred magnet middle and/or high school. When considering the results by percentage of respondents who indicated factors that were very important, the ranking of factors changes slightly. Seventy-six percent of the respondents considered impressions of the school leadership and magnet program theme to be very important. Seventy-four percent considered school reputation to be very important. When only considering the percentage of respondents who considered factors very important, the three least important factors were opportunities for parental involvement, dissatisfaction with base/calendar options, and distance to the school.

### **Appeal of Charter or Private Schools**

Question 10 on the survey asked respondents if they applied to “any of the other school options available in the community?” Of the 972 who responded to this question, 234 respondents (24.07%) indicated they had applied to a charter school, 74 respondents (7.61%) indicated they had applied to a private school, and 22 respondents (2.26%) indicated they had applied to home school. Six hundred forty-two respondents (66.04%) indicated they did not apply to another option.

In performing the analysis of the responses to the open-ended questions on the survey, the researcher began by reading each of the responses to get an overall feel for the features of charter or private schools that appealed to respondents, coded the responses, and then looked for themes.

Question 11 on the survey, an open-ended question, asked respondents who applied to a charter or a private school to describe the features of the schools that attracted them. Two hundred seventy-three respondents to the survey answered this question.

The following section describes the five most common themes that emerged and provides information about some of the specific features that appealed to parents who applied to a charter or a private school.

**Curriculum/program.** Many parents cited the curriculum/program as a feature that attracted them to charter or private schools. Parents specifically mentioned the Spanish immersion program, Montessori, STEM, and Creative Arts as well as the electives. One respondent said, “play based curriculum; less focus on test scores and data based academic achievement and more on the development of lifetime learning and social skills.” Another mentioned, “Expert developed high-quality curriculum that is on par with international standards.” Another said she liked the “challenging academics, especially STEM”; and another said, “My daughter has been learning Spanish in preschool and the opportunity to continue a foreign language in kindergarten was important.” One parent stated, “the curriculum is developmentally appropriate.”

One parent mentioned a Montessori charter school and stated, “The school more closely follows the Montessori method and has teachers that have been through actual training programs on Montessori.” Another parent said, “We applied to one charter. It is a true Montessori school. I really like that it is K-8. I think that learning style is a good fit for my son.”

**Small school and small class size.** Parents cited the benefit of attending a small



school and having small classes. They mentioned the community feel that resulted from having a smaller school, and several stated the charter school had a family feel. Parents mentioned that their children could receive individual attention, and they perceived that the school had the ability to meet their child's needs. One parent liked the "smaller class size with more personalized attention." Another liked "smaller classes that allow for extra help with students that struggle." A parent stated, "small school community feel, good families who value education, quality of education."

**Academics.** Parents mentioned the quality of education, the quality of teaching, and the educational approach. They liked the challenging academics, the academic rigor, and the focus on preparation for college. Several mentioned teachers, staff, and leadership as important. In describing teaching, parents stated they liked project-based learning, hands-on learning, and the flexibility and autonomy in the charter schools. One parent cited, "research based innovative methods of teaching."

One parent liked "more flexibility and autonomy for schools and classroom teachers to meet the needs of its students, more outdoor time, out of the box approaches." Many parents said they liked the additional opportunities and the variety of opportunities offered at charter and private schools.

Specific features mentioned as being attractive about charter and private schools were the enrichment opportunities including field trips and electives, extracurricular activities such as sports and social activities, challenging learning opportunities, the opportunities for individualized learning, and the focus on the development of lifetime learning and social skills. Parents mentioned the learning environment and the school's "promoting high academic achievement." One parent cited the "ability to offer

leadership and student enrichment/development.” Another parent stated, “their excellent job on preparing for college.” A small number of respondents liked the school requiring students to wear uniforms.

**Reputation of the school.** Based on the responses to this question, it is evident that parents look at school test results and school ratings. Test scores, school ratings, recommendations from other parents and friends, and the reputation of the school matter. Parents listen to what others have to say about the schools they are considering. One respondent said, “I have friends who have kids going there and I got a good word on the school.” Another liked the “academic reputation and class size.” One parent summed up the attraction of the charter school by stating, “small school (only 500 students), uniform required, good test scores.”

**Location.** Location of the school and its proximity to home were important to a number of parents. Parents mentioned the convenience of having other children in the family on the same schedule and at the same school. One parent stated, “The school is close to my house and my child would be on a traditional calendar like the rest of my kids.” Some parents specifically mentioned the feature of the school schedule and the school calendar.

While curriculum and program, small school and small class size, academics, reputation, and location were the top five features that attracted parents to charter or private schools, parents also mentioned other reasons for being attracted to charter and private schools. One parent summed up the features that were attractive by stating, “Flexibility in curriculum; specialty programs like Montessori programs, environmental stewardship theme, strict food policies, limiting technology, less grading/assessment, no

law enforcement on campus.” Another stated, “The ability to have more of a say in our child’s individualized learning plan, as well as better communication and diversity than our daughter’s current base school.”

Parents like the stability and continuity provided by the connection between the elementary and middle school. One parent said, “stability, being at the same school thru all of elementary and having her sibling there too.” Parents liked the opportunities for parental involvement and mentioned student behavior and discipline as positive features of charter schools. One parent cited, “control of students’ behavior, serious students, solid leadership and academics.” Several mentioned the students were more serious in a charter school. Another parent cited “individualized attention to my child’s social/emotional needs.”

A number of respondents indicated they did not want to attend their base school. One parent said that the “school offerings and approach appeared better than the base school.” Another respondent said that a charter school was an alternative to the base school, stating that there was “frustration with huge class sizes and lack of accommodation for individual learning styles” at the base school. One parent who prefers a magnet school to a charter school said,

School offerings and approach appeared better than base school. While we prefer a magnet (my husband only attended magnet schools), a charter seems somewhat better than the base. Charter is not our first choice and pales in comparison to a magnet.

Several parents cited the higher probability of getting into a charter school. One parent said, “I applied to both of these alternatives to maximize our options.” This parent

stated that “our odds are very small of being approved for a magnet and I am dissatisfied with our base and calendar options.” Another stated, “More chances to get in somewhere with specialized programs, not just one chance.” Several mentioned the feature of a faith-based school as a reason for considering a private school. Several respondents stated that parent-teacher communication and school communication were features that attracted them.

### **Influences on Final Choice of a Magnet School**

Question 15 on the survey, also an open-ended question, asked respondents, “If you could point to one experience, conversation, or piece of information from your search for a magnet and or early college school that helped you make a final choice, what would it be?”

**Personal interactions and recommendations.** The most frequent answer that parents gave to this question was personal interactions and recommendations. Parents mentioned their conversations with school staff, students, and friends as helping them make their final school choice. Talking to the principal and staff at the magnet school, to students at the school, or to students who had previously attended the school was mentioned as helping parents make their final choice. Parents cited interactions with staff at the magnet office as a positive influence.

Many parents complimented principals and the school staff. One parent noted, “The principal’s attention on the students and care for the student’s success.” Another parent stated, “Conversations with school staff were very informative and offered me the opportunity to ask further questions.” Another said, “Talking with the guidance

counselor during the high school orientation.” Another stated, “Magnet coordinators were very open to questions and very knowledgeable.” Several mentioned the helpfulness of the magnet and student assignment staff in the district office.

Numerous parents indicated they sought the advice and recommendations of friends and other parents in making their school choice. One parent stated, “Recommendations from other parents. I like to know what the experience has been like for real families.” One respondent stated, “Conversations with other parents whose children attend the school”; and another said, “Just talking to other parents and students at the school and seeing their enthusiasm.” Another parent mentioned “discussions with friends who have children there.” One parent stated, “The good reputation of families being involved and great staff support.”

Several parents stated that the recommendation of former and current students was an important factor in their decision as was their personal experience with the school. One parent stated that talking with “existing students about why they liked/loved their school” was a key factor. Parents also mentioned previous experience with the school. If their other children had attended the school and had a good experience, parents chose the school again.

**Curriculum/program.** The second most frequently mentioned factor that helped parents make their final choice was the curriculum/program at the school. Parents gave numerous examples of the specific features of the program that appealed to them. These included the magnet theme, the electives, the program for the academically gifted, the Spanish language immersion, Montessori, the International Baccalaureate Program, the science academy, the visual arts, and technology.

Parents mentioned orchestra, the university connections, the variety of electives, student leadership, science and math focus, and the school being located on a university campus. Others cited sports, extracurricular activities, the focus on preparing students for the future, students being able to earn college credit in high school, and before and after school day care. One parent mentioned that students did all projects at the school. Another mentioned, “I am specifically looking to follow the IB pathway.”

**School tours and school visits.** School tours and school visits helped parents make a magnet school choice. One parent summed up the value of school tours to the school search, stating, “Nothing can replace the experience of going into a school. The school tours were by far the most helpful part.” Parents cited knowledgeable tour guides, and many parents liked having students lead the tours. One parent commented, “The school tours were the most informative part of the search.” A parent stated, “visiting the school and seeing how the program is implemented with the children”; and another said, “the level of engagement we saw on the tours made the decision for us.”

One parent said she liked the fact that “leadership gave tours. Their enthusiasm about the program and teacher dedication was evident.” Another said the school visit provided the “opportunity to observe level and quality of students and their work, interactions between students and teachers.” A parent stated, “The school tour solidified it for me. Seeing the students in classes helped me see how much the students like the school.” Another parent said, “The school tours are what swayed me. I liked seeing the kids in the classroom, what an average day looks like.”

Parents complimented specific schools for the quality of the school tour. One parent stated, “We really appreciated the student led tour of the school. It was really

thorough and well organized.” Another parent complimented the knowledgeable student tour guides: “I was surprised at how the kids that gave the tour impressed me. They are actually the ones that sealed the decision.”

Parents like the school tours being held during school hours and felt this opportunity to experience the school during the regular school day enabled them to get a true feeling of what a normal day would be like for their children. One parent stated, “It helped to be able to see things like class size and school diversity.”

School tours are a very important component of the magnet school selection process. Parents like having the tours led by students and like having the principal present when they tour the schools. Parents seem to form much of their impression of the school on what they observe when they go on a school tour.

### **Summary**

Personal interactions and recommendations, the curriculum/program, and school tours and visits were clearly important factors that helped parents make their school choice. In addition to these features, diversity, location of the school, personal impressions, and the magnet fairs and magnet office presentation were also mentioned as important. Several parents said the key factor in their school choice was the schedule, school size, test scores, the school report card, and bussing. One parent mentioned the opportunity to get out of the current situation. Several parents commented on specific aspects of the teaching or approach to learning including the focus on student well-being, innovative teaching, and hands-on learning.

### **Additional Observations and Opinions**

Question 17 on the survey stated, “Please feel free to share any other observations

and opinions about magnet programs and/or Early College schools.”

Twenty-three percent of the survey respondents answered this question. Many expressed excitement about having magnet schools as a choice in the district and complimented the school and staff. Many described the benefits of their children attending a magnet school. The following section presents the most frequent themes that emerged.

**Excitement about magnet schools.** Parents are grateful to have magnet schools available as an option. Parents shared their excitement about magnet schools and made many positive statements: “Lots of good schools, choice is not easy”; “I’m appreciative that they are available”; “We are very pleased and excited by the programs we can access. Thank you”; “We love all the magnet themes and choices! I wish there were MORE to choose from”; “I absolutely LOVE that there are so many options for families. Thank you”; and “We love all of the amazing choices offered! Thanks for offering a wide-array of options!”

**Diversity and variety of programs in magnet schools.** In addition to their overall enthusiasm about magnet schools, parents specified attributes they appreciate, including diversity and the variety of programs: “I like the magnet schools for diversity of the students and teachers and the programs along with the activities offered to all the students”; “So much more diversity and enriching programs than neighborhood schools”; “Magnet programs offer many opportunities for children to expand on their learning and build skills needed beyond the classroom”; and “I love the magnet options. I love the electives they offer and how they give kids an opportunity to explore so much of what life has to offer.”



**Magnet school students receive additional benefits.** Parents believe that children who attend magnet schools receive additional benefits. They described the specific benefits they feel their children receive by attending a magnet school including the friendly atmosphere and the additional educational opportunities. Parents mentioned aspects of magnet schools that they like, including “The diversity in education, the path to the IB Diploma offered, and the challenging classes that are offered!” One parent stated, “The connection with the university is very important to us!” Another parent commented, “My children have already benefited from magnet schools that concentrate on the arts. It has encouraged both of them to spread their wings and made it easier to focus on academics as well. The outlet of their arts helps them every day.”

One parent commented, “Attending a magnet school exposes children to a variety of educational opportunities that we know would not be offered at a regular high school.” Another parent said, “Having so many choices is great. I think middle school is the time to try out as many different electives as possible to have a better idea of what path to pursue in high school. I’m grateful magnets provide that opportunity.” One parent stated, “Magnets feel more like a close-knit group/family than just a school they go to.”

Parents who have had children in magnet schools were pleased with their experience and cited specific reasons for being happy with magnet schools: “All four of my kids have been in magnet schools since Elementary – the programs attract the most passionate teachers, which means my students have had excellent instruction throughout their school experiences”; “School leadership has played a huge part in making the schools great or not so great. The magnet theme has not been as important as access to programs and excellent teaching has been”; “My oldest daughter has been at two magnet

schools and we are very happy with the leadership, program offerings and community feel”; “I feel that the district is really interested in my child’s educational development”; and “Thank you, for being thoughtful about providing great programs for our kids! We love our schools.”

**Compliments to staff.** Parents complimented the staff at the schools and in the magnet program office. One parent said, “I was most impressed by magnet coordinators who let the school (students, displays, etc.) do most of the talking but also had clearly planned tours that covered all of the essential information.” Parents liked being able to interact with principals even if they did not stay for the entire tour: “I really appreciated when principals joined the tour, even if briefly.” Another parent said, “We loved that we were able to talk with the administrators and teachers while touring. Everyone took the time to speak with us about the program.”

Parents made positive comments about the information sessions and the magnet program staff. One parent said, “I appreciate the variety of info sessions available and the leadership and knowledge of the Magnet program staff.” Others complimented school staff:

Both the student information data manager and the magnet coordinator are very courteous, friendly, and prompt in responding to questions and concerns. It’s been a pleasure working with them both, and I’m grateful to have had their help in navigating my unique situation;

and “We would like to call out that the support we received was top notch. Despite the stressful situation and time constraints we had at the last minute, they were patient and helpful.”

Parents complimented a staff member in the magnet program office for her help and advice: “She has been amazing. The time and effort she spent answering questions and helping people through this process is amazing. Everywhere I went, her name would come up as the best person to talk to.” Echoing a similar feeling, another parent stated,

She is AMAZING! She is informed, objective, thorough, accurate, and enthusiastic! I don’t know if there’s a way to reduce parental stress and paranoia about the application process, but she responded thoroughly and quickly to thousands of panicked parents over and over and over. She’s the best!!!

A parent commented on how helpful the Facebook group for kindergarten was for her, stating,

The 2018 Kindergarten Facebook group was REALLY helpful. The staff person answered many questions and helped to educate us with the process; she asked for feedback and I was glad to share things that were confusing on the website and tech glitches that made the experience a little more complicated.

Another parent said, “Getting feedback from parents with children in magnet schools via social media was extremely helpful.”

## **Conclusions**

The survey results clearly show that the respondents value and appreciate magnet schools. Parents believe magnet schools offer many additional opportunities for their children including unique educational programs and activities. They believe children who attend magnet schools are receiving additional benefits they would not receive at their base schools. Parents are very satisfied with the magnitude of the offerings and appreciate the school staff with many respondents complimenting teachers, principals,

magnet coordinators, and office staff as well as the staff at the magnet office.

### **Focus Groups**

The researcher facilitated focus groups in August and September 2018 with three groups of parents whose children were selected through the magnet application process to attend kindergarten at one of the 12 magnet elementary schools selected for the study.

The 12 schools are primarily located in the downtown area, and the student population in the 12 schools consists of a high percentage of high-poverty students. All parents whose kindergarten children would attend one of the 12 schools during the 2018-2019 school year were emailed a request to participate in a focus group to discuss their experiences in considering and applying to a magnet elementary school. Of the parents who were emailed, 18 indicated their willingness to participate in a focus group. Six of these parents had conflicts with the dates and times of the meetings and did not participate.

Twelve parents were interviewed. The focus groups were conducted at the school district office and facilitated by the researcher at three different times. The focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by the researcher.

The focus group participants were asked to respond to seven questions about their decision to apply to a magnet school. The first question was an open-ended question in which participants were asked to comment on their decision to apply to a magnet school. The second and third questions asked parents to describe their sources of information and the usefulness of their sources. The fourth question asked parents to describe the important factors in their school search and to state the most important factor. The fifth question asked parents if they considered a charter or a private school and, if so, to discuss the features that appealed to them. The sixth question asked participants to

discuss why they chose a magnet school, and the final question asked if there was anything else they wanted to share. These seven questions provided rich descriptions of parent perspectives on their school search and their decision to choose a magnet school.

In facilitating the focus groups, the researcher hoped to gain further understanding of parent decisions to choose a magnet school. In discussing their school choice, parents provided rich descriptions of their school search, the sources of information they used, and the factors that were important considerations in their school decision. If parents investigated charter schools and private schools, they shared information about the features they found attractive and then gave their reasons for deciding on a magnet school.

Throughout this section, in order to provide confidentiality, pseudonyms are used when referring to focus group participants. The names of the schools referred to by the participants have also been changed. Quotations from participants are verbatim. Observations about the school decision-making process from the focus group participants provide additional insight and understanding into the approach and process parents use to make a school choice.

### **Sources of Information**

Parents in the focus groups used a variety of sources to get information about schools. They talked to family members, friends, other parents, school staff, and members in various organizations and groups they belong to in the community. Parents attended information meetings at the magnet school office, participated in the magnet school fairs, and took school tours and made school visits. They studied written information and used online resources such as the district website for magnet schools and

individual school websites. They gained information and asked questions using the Facebook page for kindergarten parents. They studied statistics published online and in the newspaper, including school report card data and school ratings on GreatSchools.org. In discussing the sources of information used in their school search, parents also shared their opinions about the usefulness and effectiveness of the information sources. This section describes the specific sources of information parents used to learn about the magnet schools.

**Personal interactions and recommendations.** Parents talked to family members, their friends, teachers, principals, and others to gather information about schools. Carol mentioned that her sister who works in a magnet school had encouraged her to look at magnet schools, telling her, “You got to check this out.” Abe mentioned that he and his wife had talked to friends who were teachers in the school district, although not at the schools they were considering, and said they were reassuring about some of their concerns. He gave as an example:

We would say, “We’re kind of concerned with this,” and they’d be like, “That’s reasonable, but you really shouldn’t worry about that.... This is a normal thing, they’re going to grow up,” that sort of deal. So other teachers that were parents.

Several parents mentioned they got information from groups they belonged to in the community including groups with parents with older children. Sara said her exercise group allowed her “to meet some older moms or some well-experienced moms as well as younger moms.” She said she also talked to administrators and teachers at the preschool her child attended to get their recommendations. Martha said, “I also talked with a lot of people at our church, neighbors, to people when I was at the library or at the dancing

class.”

Wendy mentioned that “It was the other parents who had done it before” that gave her information. She described how these parents told her “she needed to be touring in the spring or fall, so that you can apply in the spring.” She said, “I would have loved spreadsheets if I’d known anyone ...” She pointed out that first time kindergarten parents are not aware that they should be considering schools a year before their children will be in kindergarten. She said,

It’s not occurring to me when he’s four years old, the fall before he goes to kindergarten, I should start thinking about magnets a whole year from now, because it’s my first kid. I’m still afraid of the idea of putting him on a bus.

Carol agreed, stating, “Everything just sort of—it’s overwhelming if you’ve never had to deal with it.”

**Magnet school websites.** Sara said she started her search online because she did not know other parents, that her friends did not have children. Michelle said, “the online sources are quite useful, so I read about every single type of magnet school online.” Delores said she found the district website for magnet schools helpful, stating, “I got a lot of information off the website—the magnet website.” She said that “for me, the website was actually helpful. I did go through and I read the descriptions of all the different programs, and I also followed the pathways through the middle schools and the high schools, to make sure that what we picked for elementary school, we would be okay with those choices, as well.” Debbie said, “The website was the first place I started.”

**Kindergarten Facebook page.** Several parents mentioned they had consulted the Facebook page for kindergarten parents. Victoria said the Facebook page was a place

for “sharing magnet information and tour information” and complimented the administrator, stating, “She was an incredible resource, just her alone.” One of the parents said one of the benefits was that people posted from the previous year. She said,

So, there’s this institutional memory, if you will, from parents from previous years who applied, where they applied. Did they get in? Did they not get in? What were the tours like? And things like that, which is really useful.

**Magnet fair.** Many parents mentioned they had attended the district magnet fair and the fair for magnet elementary schools. Sara said, “the magnet fair helped a lot. I was able to actually have a conversation with representatives of the school.” She found the fair “very useful because it’s just all in one place and I could have some one-on-one and collect information.”

**Magnet information sessions.** In commenting on the benefit of the magnet information sessions, Lucy commented that

Some of it was just basic ground-setting, I guess, so they went over a lot about what’s the difference between a magnet school and a charter school, and some of it was very, very basic, but I am an information hoarder, so I like to just have all the information.

**School tours.** Parents were very positive about the school tours. Abe said, “The tours were definitely the thing that was the most helpful.” Carol said that although the touring schedule was difficult for working parents, it was crucial to gain an understanding of the school. She said, “The touring schedule is hard if you work. It just is, but you can’t get a sense of schools unless you tour them.” She said, “I went to, I don’t know, seven tours or something, and I made my husband come, so it’s a little bit of a logistical



nightmare.” Sara said she toured 18 schools. Katie said she did 15 school tours, and “it was basically like a full-time job.”

Several parents commented that the tours were the deciding factor in their school decision and had they not gone on the tour, they would not have selected the school they decided upon. For these parents, the tour was the determining factor for their school choice. Lucy said she would not have chosen the same school,

Had I not shown up at the school, and seen things in action, because that’s where I got really good information, based on what I saw. Based on paper, we probably would not have selected Riverside as an option, but because I went there and toured the school and asked the questions and met the staff and everything, then we ended up making that one of our choices.

Like Lucy, Delores also said she would have selected a different school if she had not gone on the tour of the school:

I had dismissed Lakeside because I had felt like it was too large for my oldest to handle well, because he’s a little bit more introverted and doesn’t really like a lot of people around, but when you tour Lakeside, it feels big but it doesn’t feel overwhelming, and I don’t know that I would have—again, if I hadn’t done the tour, I don’t know that I would have picked Lakeside.

Sara found tours the most helpful source of information. She appreciated being able to ask questions during the tours. She said, “For me, it was ultimately the tours, yeah, to be able to ask the question.” Katie said that

the tours were, in my opinion, probably the most helpful to get an idea of the soul of the school, so to speak. And that was very, very telling to see the parents, and

talking to parents at that school during the tours.

Debbie echoed the comments of others on the impact of the tours:

You can tell so much just by walking in a school, peeking into a classroom, eavesdropping on conversations, looking to see what's on the walls or not on the walls. I hate schools that are too neat and too orderly. You know? If there is nothing being displayed on a wall, if I don't see messy little kindergartener artwork and get some sense of creativity going on in the classroom, I have no interest in it at all, and you can see those things by walking in any school.

Katie also commented on being able to learn about a school from personal observations, stating that "it can be a huge eye-opener, if the discipline or leadership is lacking, you can see that in a school." She summed up her feelings about school tours, stating, "Those tours were very telling."

**Statistics on chances of acceptance.** One parent commented that she liked having information about the number of applicants and the chances of selection at each school, stating,

I like to know roughly my chances, and if a school never has any openings, or has a million applicants. I like to look and see how many people roughly, and what that looks like, so I thought that was useful.

## **Summary**

Parents take the school selection process very seriously and use numerous sources in their search for information about schools. They consult family members, friends, school staff, and members of groups they belong to; read extensively; conduct online research using the district and school websites; attend information meetings offered by

the magnet office and individual schools; and participate in magnet school fairs and school tours.

One parent summed up the decision-making process by saying, “I feel, like when I said, ‘What goes into your decision?’ Well a lot of factors. A part of it is just gathering the information.”

### **Factors in School Decision-Making**

Parents take into account a range of factors in considering their choice of a magnet school. Among the factors that were most important to parents were the focus of the school, meeting the individual needs of the child, diversity, and stability. Parents had mixed feelings about school grades and school ratings. Location of the school was important to some parents as was the availability of before and after child care.

**School focus.** Parents defined “focus of the school” in several different ways including magnet theme, electives, school schedule, school climate, and discipline. Carol was enthusiastic about the way the magnet theme permeated the classroom and the school and how it was integrated into the curriculum. She said,

Mine was focus, I think, of the school. My kid is—he was born an engineer. His brothers are both very engineering-minded, too, and knowing the focus, and seeing how they implemented the focus, and seeing the classrooms and they have maker labs, which is a really cool thing, and seeing—people are like, ‘How do they teach engineering to a kindergartener?’ And I’m like, ‘Well,’ and just seeing how they integrated that theme into the curriculum was really cool.

Wendy explained that for her, the important focus was Spanish and said that all three of her children, who are very different, could benefit from learning Spanish. She

said,

Everyone can learn Spanish, and then go where you want after that. So, the focus of the school, like you were saying, for my family—and I think each family has a different thing that they think is the important focus, but ultimately, the school you choose is the important focus to you.

Debbie also said that her son wanted to learn Spanish. She said, “And he’s in kindergarten. He’s very vocal about wanting to learn Spanish, and our base school didn’t offer any languages. So that was one of the reasons that we applied to magnet schools.”

Victoria said, “my top priority was discipline and how they viewed behavior.”

Lucy said that her focus was also on school climate and discipline. In her role as a school district employee, she has the opportunity to travel to different schools and observe the school climate and discipline of different schools. She said she had several possible school choices and based her school decision on school climate and discipline. She stated,

I would say that was probably our primary factor. We had several magnet themes that we thought were awesome, and so when it came down to really picking, if the school was equally convenient, and they had a similar theme or a theme that we liked, it really came down to what the school climate and discipline was like.

Michelle mentioned that “openness to parent involvement was another thing that attracted us to a magnet school.” Victoria agreed, stating, “there was a committee over the summer that was getting together new kindergarteners with existing students, and I felt like part of a community before we ever got there.” She concluded by saying how special it was to feel a part of the community—“the way you can be a part of it is really

special.”

**Meeting the individual needs of the child.** Parents said an important factor in their school choice was the variety of offerings which enabled all of their children to attend the same school but to pursue their individual interests. Delores said this was a factor that appealed to her when she chose Lakeside. She said that each of her three children is very different; but because the school offers many different options, each child will be able to “find their niche.” She said,

And that actually was probably the most important factor for us, was that all three of my children can go to this same school, which was important, and find their own path within that school. Does that make sense? And they could all be very, very different, but because Lakeside has the multitude of options that they have, they could all still be in their same place.

Abe recognized that his second child was frequently changing his interests and wanted a school that could accommodate his son’s changing interests. Abe liked the electives which would enable his son’s different interests to be met. He also liked the structure of the magnet school with the opportunity for children to move around more. He said, “So in addition to the diverse interests with the electives, we thought that breaking up the day with let’s do something that—it’s educational, but it’s also a break from that structure.”

Margaret echoed the importance of the school working with the child on an individual basis, stating, “That’s sort of a lot of what shaped our decision to apply, was knowing the needs of our kids are going to be so different and knowing that the public school system is the best place.” She said her child is hyperactive and said, “We really

needed a place where he could thrive and not become a behavior problem, but a school that would work with him.” She chose a small school with fewer students and said, “We’re hoping that the program is a good fit for him.” She concluded by stating, “So the focus was really on him, and what would be best for him.”

Several parents commented on the school’s ability to push children to excel and to recognize when children had specific learning needs. Even if they did not test as academically gifted, the school challenged and encouraged them. Abe said teachers “were doing the advanced stuff” with his older child and then the staff recognized that she had a learning disability. He said, “We developed a plan to address that as well.”

Sara said her child loves to learn and she wants her “not to be bored” and wants her “to be given challenging work.” She liked the fact that the school she chose could give her child the extra challenging work she felt her child needed. Sara also emphasized the importance of her child being in a school that was a good fit for her. She said, “She needs to have a place within that [school].”

Margaret, who has an older child attending a magnet school, said she liked the fact the magnet school had electives because they supplement what is learned in the core classes and can meet the need for additional challenging work. She said she liked her son having “the ability to take more challenging classes in the areas that interested him.” Victoria said, “My kids need to be engaged and challenged, or you will see behaviors that you don’t expect. That’s how they communicate that they are not academically challenged.”

Lucy said she wanted “a place where [her child] can explore some things and be challenged.” Martha also said she wanted her child to be challenged and said, “I was

looking for a challenging education place but at the same time that will provide other aspects of learning.” She said, “I want them to encourage her, to push her just a little bit more, just a little bit more. I didn’t want the normal. I wanted a little bit more than the normal.” She said she wanted “a place where they can explore their potential.” She summed up her thoughts by saying, “I was looking for a school that will help her.” Katie said when they toured Lakeside, she “felt like that would be a place where he would be celebrated for who he was and not tried to be disciplined into something else.”

**Diversity.** A number of parents indicated that diversity was an important factor in their choice of a magnet school. They appreciated the opportunity for their children to attend a school with students from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Parents discussed how magnet schools enhance desegregation and said they wanted to be a part of that effort. Parents saw benefits to their children of a school experience in a school with a diverse student population. Carol expressed her excitement about this aspect of her child attending a magnet school:

One of the important things in a magnet school is that it desegregates, and I’m really excited that my son is going to be able to get an experience. We live in an all-white neighborhood, essentially, so I’m really excited. He’s going to not be the majority, probably, maybe for the only time in his life, and I think that’s a really important experience, so that’s another factor that went into my choice of sending him.

Delores said diversity was important for her and her husband also. She said her husband was Indian and had attended a school where he and his brother were the only Indians in the school. Her husband told Delores how important it was to him that their

children attend a school with a diverse student population. She said he told her that

I want them to go to a school where there are a lot of different cultures that kind of meld together. I don't want them to be at a school where they'll be the only ones that have any ethnicity at all.

Delores said that one of the reasons they chose Lakeside was "that it is actually a very diverse school. There's a lot of different ethnicities that go there."

Lucy said that in addition to racial diversity she wanted socioeconomic diversity, stating, "our base is not the whitest school, but one of the whitest schools, and we were looking for something more diverse, but also socioeconomically diverse." Like Lucy, Wendy wanted socioeconomic diversity. She mentioned going to the magnet school and said,

I'm very pleased by the socioeconomic diversity. It is very diverse racially and ethnically, as well, but the socioeconomic—they all get free breakfast, that's how socioeconomic the school is. I don't need him to have free breakfast—we're fine—but I like that there's that diversity, because it's very, very important to me that he encounters people that are different than him.

Margaret also indicated she wanted her child to go to school with a diverse student population. She said,

Yeah, diversity was a big key for us, as well. I am Hispanic. I grew up with a similar situation where my brother and sister and I were the only Hispanic people in our school, so we were representing, but I wanted my children ... to have that exposure.

Like Margaret, Victoria said it was important for her children to be in a diverse



environment, stating, “I wanted to be part of the magnet school for diversity and equality, and for my kids to have all sorts of diversity ... I want them to accept everyone’s differences, including their own.” Debbie, who attended private schools, said, “I grew up in a very, very, one race school, and so I wanted my kids to experience diversity.”

**Stability and continuity.** Several parents in the focus groups live in areas where the population is growing which often brings about changes in school assignment. One of the factors which influenced their decision to apply to a magnet school was the stability of school assignment that a magnet school brings. Once a child is in a magnet school, the parent knows the child can attend a magnet middle school and a magnet high school.

Michelle discussed the uncertainty of living in a rapidly growing area and the impact on her family. She stated, “I didn’t like the flux, the change of school population every year, which led to a kind of unstable feeling, despite excellent teachers, excellent principals, that sort of thing.” Victoria, who also lives in an area that is rapidly growing, said, “So it’s a constant thing of churn, and I wanted—I was hopeful, and I hope this will be the case that the magnet track will mean more stability for my family.” She pointed out that “if you wanted to go to a magnet high school, you needed to be in a magnet middle school, and if you wanted to be in a magnet middle school, you needed to be in a magnet elementary school.”

**School grades and school ratings.** Parents reviewed the grades given to the individual magnet schools, but some parents felt they were not an accurate assessment of the school based on their personal experience. Sara said,

I used to look at those early on. I think that’s what I looked at first when I was

pregnant with my daughter. And I don't think they match with what—the grades I don't think match with what I've learned about the schools. I just don't.

She added that she “stopped looking at the grades” and said she decided “to just go on the information that I had gotten back from, whether it be the questions, or the emails, or those kind of things, or tangible, real data versus whomever puts that information out.”

Martha mentioned that her base school had higher rankings than the magnet school she chose and said “if you are looking at the grades that they give to the schools, you would think that I would have put her in her base school. I didn't.” Margaret indicated she was worried that the school she liked “does not have awesome grades,” and said she had “talked to a lot of people about it” and said what she “ended up looking at a lot more was how the teachers viewed the school, if they felt safe, and all that kind of stuff.” She said if she had not talked to other people who were familiar with the school, she would not have chosen the school.

Michelle indicated that she looked at test scores but said,

I also know to take it with a grain of salt, because those are complex. They can't tell you about what an individual teacher is accomplishing, because they can't tell you what he or she had to work with to begin with and what, you know, how far from behind are some students in that population having to come. So, I mean, I do look at that, but I look at it as one little piece of information out of many.

Katie said that the score given to a school by GreatSchools was very influential with people she knows in her neighborhood and said that the score “does impact people's perception of the school.” She described how a low score could cause people not to want to have their child go to that school and that a high score would have a positive impact

even if the school was not a good match for the child. She said, “Well, the school may have nothing that your child needs, but it can look like a great school because it has an 8 out of 10. So, the GreatSchools score to me is the most important thing.” Victoria viewed the

school grades as a measure of academic success, of a very particular kind of academic success, and in my case, I’m not worried about my kids learning enough Common Core and being in the right environment to pass those tests.

She pointed out that Riverside did not have a high score but said, “That is not my priority in what’s important for the next six years of their education.” She summed up her feelings on school ratings by saying, “So the scores—they weren’t measuring what I cared about.”

**Limiting factors.** A number of parents mentioned factors which limited their school choice. Among these factors were distance to the school and before and after school care. Although not an important factor to all of the parents in the focus groups, distance to the school was a factor in the choice of a school for a number of parents. Martha indicated she “looked at my options based on location because even though there was a good school 20 minutes down the road, 25, but there was another that’s 13 minutes down the road ... am I going to drive 25 minutes?” She said distance was critical for her because she did not want her child on a bus, and so “I had to take her.” She said, “I’m just not ready to put my daughter on the bus.”

Other parents of kindergarten children expressed similar concerns about distance to the school as a factor in their decision-making. Carol said she needed to find a school which met the needs of both her children who are very different, “because we’re not

driving all over the place.” She indicated she only applied to one magnet school, “because that’s the only magnet we were willing to drive to.” Delores said she had toured “every single school that we were magnet zoned for, except for ... because I’m like, there’s no bus and I’m not driving that far, because I already knew, anything that I do, I’ll be doing forever.” Debbie said that

the magnet school options near our house are very small; there are only three that I was willing to drive my kid to every day. So that kind of narrowed it down a whole lot for us, was the first thing I looked at was location, as a function of where we live.

One parent said that having before and after school care was essential for her school choice. She said, “So that was one of the limiting factors for us, was do they have onsite before and aftercare?” She said, “If you don’t have after aftercare, I don’t care. Done.”

### **Summary**

When parents consider their school choice, a number of factors are particularly important. Parents frequently mentioned the focus of the school which includes magnet theme, school climate and school discipline, meeting the individual needs of the child, diversity, stability in school assignment, and opportunities for parent involvement as important factors in their choice of a school for their children. Parents had mixed feelings about school grades and school ratings. For some parents, the distance to the school, the necessity of before and after school child care, and the desire to have all their children in the same school were factors that limited their school choice.

### **Attractive Features of Charter and Private Schools**

Parents were asked if they considered a charter or a private school and, if they did, to share the features of these schools that appealed to them and then to share why they chose a magnet school. Several parents indicated they felt obligated to consider all of their school choice options including charter and private schools. One parent who said she felt obligated to consider all school options said she applied to a charter school; but when she went on a school tour and talked to people at the school, she was concerned that they could not answer her questions about resources that were available to help children with special needs. She said,

I wasn't comfortable with not knowing what kind of resources they would have in place, or not knowing that they would have the resources for both of my children essentially, to go to the charter school. I wasn't confident in the system. I'm more confident that the school district has the resources, so that's why we chose the school district.

Delores indicated she looked at several charter schools with high scores. When her son was accepted at one of these charter schools, she said she had seriously considered it but decided against it because "there's no busing, there's no lunch, there's no socioeconomic and very little ethnic diversity." She went on to give additional reasons for not choosing the charter school:

To go to a charter school, especially one like ..., you have to have a certain level of privilege, because you have to have someone available to drive you and pick you up, and you have to have the money to send them lunch every day, and you have to have the money to provide field trips, because nothing is included, and it would have been a solid option if he hadn't gotten into the magnet program. We

probably would have considered it a little bit further, although I still think we would have done his year-round option first.

Abe said that the requirement for parents to volunteer at the charter school appealed to him. He stated,

So, probably not necessarily a direct correlation to, but it seemed like if you kind of had that constant parent involvement, it made for maybe a little bit of a better community for the school, and there may be some correlation between discipline or stuff like that.

Debbie said she was attracted to a charter school because she “thought that he would really thrive in a not traditional classroom situation. And we were slightly concerned about behavioral issues of not being challenged and having to be at a desk or a table or whatever.” She also looked at private schools because of her experience in a private school and also because of the religious aspect and the “moral, ethical values” of the private school. Debbie concluded by saying, “So not a traditional classroom, or what we perceive as a traditional classroom, and the religion thing were probably what attracted us most.”

Victoria said she had considered a charter school that was located “right around the corner from my house.” She said the school would have been convenient, but she “still wanted to be in the public school system, for philosophical reasons.” She said, “I am driving 35 minutes each way for the kids to go to this magnet school that we love, and that is worth it to me.”

Sara said, “nothing is wrong with a charter school for a specific child,” but added, “it didn’t fit for ..., our daughter.” She said she loved the concept of “having classroom

outside of the classroom” and having students go on a lot of field trips, but “it just wasn’t for our daughter.” Like Sara, Martha found that charter schools “were just not a fit for my daughter” and also mentioned the financial responsibility required at a charter school.

Not all parents considered charter schools. One parent who was adamantly opposed to charters stated, “I think that they’re problematic on many levels.” Another said, “I just philosophically disagree with the money that’s been given to charters ... I think if you want a private school, pay for it; it’s just sort of my feelings about it.”

Several parents considered private schools. Katie said the outstanding leadership at some of the private schools as well as the school community were attractive features. She stated that

a lot of families are looking for community, and they’re able to get that community in a private environment, because for the most part, those families don’t leave, so it’s a similar thing of, they don’t want this turnover of friendships.

Katie said, “These kids [in private schools] have networks when they graduate that they’ll have for the rest of their lives. They’ll have friendships for the rest of their lives.”

She pointed out the advantages of the child being well known by everyone in the school. She said that in the small private school, “everybody knows your child ... and that is huge, to be known by all of the people in the school, from the crossing guard that says hey to your kid when you walk in in the morning ....”

Victoria mentioned that many of her friends who sent their children to private schools were concerned about safety and concerned “that something’s going to happen to their baby, and it’s scary.” She said that “Some people are very fearful. And fear is a huge factor.” Victoria, however, did not share this concern, stating, “I felt much more

confident putting my child in a public school, where the doors lock and there's a security guard.”

Martha said she had looked at private schools because she liked the smaller size and wanted a smaller school for her child. Sara also considered a private school and said one feature she found attractive was how the private school guided students through the college application and selection process. She said, “at first we were going to send our daughter to a private school” and said she had toured private schools first. Sara mentioned that she had narrowed her school choice to one private and one magnet school. She said when she asked at the private school about providing challenging work to her daughter, “They were like, ‘Well, you know, at this private school, we have to keep everybody on the same kind of wave.’” Sara said, “We don't want a child that gets bored and gets in trouble or just stops liking kindergarten or kind of pulls back in learning because she just isn't ....” In stating the reason, she chose the magnet school, she said,

It's just surprising that we started this journey thinking that we would go with a private school and we wound up at a magnet school. And it's not because of monetary reasons. It's because of challenging our daughter, having that curriculum.

### **Summary**

Parents who considered charter and private schools were attracted by features such as small school and small class size, community feel with the opportunity of building lifelong friendships, opportunities for parent involvement, stability and continuity, high test scores, and assistance with the college application and selection process. Parents did not choose a charter or a private school because of the lack of



resources to help children with special needs, the lack of diversity, the additional financial costs, the unwillingness of the private school to provide additional academic challenges based on the needs of the child, or because the schools did not provide lunch and transportation.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand parent choice of a magnet school in a large urban school district. This study examined the sources of information parents use, the factors that influence their decisions to apply to a magnet school, the features that attract parents to a charter or private school, and the factors that influence parents to choose a magnet school rather than a charter or a private school.

A mixed methods research design was chosen for the study because the researcher believed a more comprehensive understanding of parent choice of a magnet school would result from collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative aspects of the study provide descriptive statistics and concrete data about the school search. The qualitative features of the study provide rich descriptions with direct quotations of parents discussing the process of making a school choice. This mixed-methods study provides insight and a plethora of information about parent school choice of a magnet school in a large urban district.

The survey used in this study was designed by the urban school district and completed by 984 of the 5,183 applicants who applied for a magnet school or an early college for the 2018-2019 school year. The survey included questions about the sources of information parents used in their school search; the factors that influenced their decision to apply to a magnet school; and four open-ended questions which asked participants to share the significant influences on their school search, their observations and opinions about magnet schools, the features that appealed to them if they applied to a charter or a private school, and the reasons they chose a magnet school.

In addition to the survey, the researcher facilitated three focus groups with 12

participants whose children attended kindergarten in one of the magnet schools located in the downtown area of this urban school district. Focus group participants responded to seven questions about their decision to consider and apply to a magnet school. The questions asked included the sources of information they used in their search, the factors that were important to them, the features of a charter or private school that attracted them if they applied, and the reasons for their decision to choose a magnet school.

Because similar questions were asked on the survey and of participants in the focus groups, a comparison can be made between what respondents indicated in the written survey and what focus group participants said in the focus group meetings. This comparison provides a means of triangulation of the data as well as a richer and more expansive description of the process school choosers use in deciding on a magnet school.

The study was designed to answer three research questions:

1. What sources of information do parents use in making the decision to consider a magnet school?
2. What factors influence parent decisions to apply to a magnet school for their children?
3. What factors influence parent decisions to choose a magnet school rather than a charter or a private school?

An analysis of the survey responses and the comments by participants in the focus groups provide a comprehensive understanding of parent school choice of a magnet school. In this chapter, the major findings will be highlighted and discussed, along with implications for practice, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future study.

### **Research Questions**

1. What sources of information do parents use in making the decision to consider a magnet school?

The most important source of information as indicated in both survey results and in focus groups is other people. In seeking information about schools, parents consult family, friends, other parents, members of groups they belong to, colleagues at work, and school and district staff. Through word of mouth, school choosers gather facts, opinions, and recommendations from people they know. Parent social networks are important sources of information about schools, including magnet schools.

The Internet is an important source of information about schools. Many parents indicated they began their school search online. Parents use online resources such as the district magnet schools website, individual school websites, the Facebook page for kindergarten parents, mom's groups, the education department's website, and GreatSchools.org to gather information about the schools.

The district magnet fair in which all magnet schools are represented, the magnet fair for magnet elementary schools, and sessions at the district magnet schools' office are important sources of information about the schools. Although school tours were not listed in the survey as a specific source of information, parents in both the open-ended survey questions and in focus groups mentioned they had gathered valuable information from the tours. Parents appreciated the opportunity to have their specific questions answered by school personnel and the students who frequently led tours. Parents found the school tours gave them the opportunity to experience the school when it was in session and to see firsthand how the school operates. Several parents stated that the school tour was the deciding factor in their school choice.

2. What factors influence parent decisions to apply to a magnet school for their children?

The survey results indicated that the magnet theme, impressions of school leadership, school reputation, and diversity were the most important factors influencing parent decisions to apply to a magnet school. Parents in the focus groups indicated that the focus of the school, which included the magnet theme and school climate and discipline, meeting the individual needs of the child, and diversity were the most important factors in their school choice. Although survey respondents indicated that test scores, school ratings, and school reputation were important factors, focus group parents tended to place less emphasis on them. They did not specifically mention school reputation as an important factor and said they considered the principal as part of the total picture of the school rather than as a separate influencing factor.

Both survey respondents and focus group participants mentioned school assignment stability and distance to the school as factors in their school choice although they did not rank them as high as other factors. For some parents, dissatisfaction with the base school was a factor in their decision-making. Interestingly, opportunities for parental involvement was the lowest ranking of the nine factors listed in survey results; however, some parents in the focus groups considered it a significant factor.

In replying to the open-ended question on the survey which asked parents to describe the one thing which helped them make their final choice, many respondents described their positive interactions with school staff and the positive comments about the school from friends whose children attended the school. The second most frequently mentioned factor was the curriculum or program at the school. Parents cited numerous

examples of program components such as the magnet theme, the visual and performing arts available, the science academy, and the variety of electives offered as factors in their decision. Numerous respondents stated the school tours and school visits were a significant factor in their school decision.

3. What factors influence parent decisions to choose a magnet school rather than a charter school or a private school?

Parents described a number of attractive features of charter and private schools. Parents were attracted by the curriculum or program, small school, small classes, academics, the reputation of the school, the school community, school test results, and school ratings. They liked the stability and continuity provided by students being at the same school for their elementary school as well as middle and high school years.

Parents who considered a charter or private school gave a number of reasons for choosing a magnet school rather than a charter school or private school. Reasons included the charter school not having resources to meet the special needs of their child, the lack of diversity, not providing transportation or lunch, and the extra costs of attending a charter or private school. One parent decided not to send her child to a private school because the school told her they treated all their students the same and would not provide extra academic challenges to her child.

### **Understanding Parent School Choice**

In this current climate of school choice, it is critical to have a comprehensive understanding of the process parents use to make a school choice. This study provides an increased awareness of the perspectives of parents as they research schools, consider possible choices, and then ultimately select a school. While rational choice theorists

would have us believe parents make a careful cost-benefit analysis of their possible choices, this study provides evidence that parents do not consistently follow a model of rational choice when making a school choice decision. Levin and Milgrom (2004) defined rational choice as, “to mean the process of determining what options are available and then choosing the most preferred one according to some consistent criterion” (p. 1). The rational choice model as discussed by Levin and Milgrom assumes that people have preferences and make their choices based on their preferences (p. 3).

Contrary to rational choice theory, Calvo (2007), in her study of parent choice in Seattle, found that “Parents rarely weigh costs and benefits methodically, or even clearly define criteria for themselves. Most parents gather lots of information from lots of different sources, mull it over for a while and let a decision surface” (p. 96).

Similarly, parents in this study often made their school choice based on factors such as the distance to the school and how far they were willing to drive to take their child to school, the convenience of having all siblings attend the same school, the availability of childcare, and the conviction that a particular school would provide the engaging experience the parent was seeking for their child. Some parents rejected the objectivity of test scores and school ratings, believing that they did not really match their personal experience of the school. One parent in this study initially rejected certain schools because they did not match her preference for a small school environment for her child. However, context made a difference; and after visiting the school, this parent decided that the large school she chose had a “small school feel.” In this parent’s case, her intuition, not an objective analysis, led her to her school choice. A number of parents indicated they made their school choice on their personal observations and on the basis of

“what felt right.” Clearly, many parent school choice decisions in this study were not based on a rational basis.

This study demonstrated that parents are serious school researchers. Parents described doing a great deal of research on schools. They made spreadsheets, worksheets, and charts to display and compare the various features and attributes of the schools they were considering.

Lucy told the focus group, “My husband this morning was like, ‘Are you going to embarrass us with your spreadsheet?’ And I was like, ‘Probably.’ So, this is the disclaimer. I’ve got a spreadsheet and a worksheet in my bag.” Delores said she also made a spreadsheet and said she updates it and shares it with others, stating, “I have spreadsheets for preschools, elementary, middle, and high. And I update every year.” Another participant said, “I posted my little worksheet for people on the 2018 kindergarten parent groups, but one of the magnet coordinators was like, ‘Can I give this out when people come to tour our school?’” Another parent said, “I’m like you. I had a spreadsheet—I did—and a chart, and 20 pages. Every time I’d tour a school, I’d go down and I’d type in my impressions into my little spreadsheet.”

The process of researching schools is time consuming and often stressful and frustrating for parents. Working parents mentioned how they would have to take time off work to visit schools and how frustrating it was when they learned a school did not have a feature that they considered essential and did not find this out until they had taken time off work to visit the school.

Some parents considered a very small number of schools, while others considered every school in their school priority zone. Some parents indicated they felt compelled to



consider every possible school, while other parents who had a particular focus for their school search only considered schools offering that focus and made their school choice from those schools. These parents were able to more quickly decide on their school choice.

Schwartz (2004) suggested choosers can be categorized as “maximizers” and “satisficers.” Maximizers seek “the best” choice believing it is necessary to continue the search almost indefinitely until finding the best. Satisficers, on the other hand, seek a choice that is “good enough” and will discontinue the search when they find a choice that is good enough. While both maximizers and satisficers have standards, satisficers will be content when they find a choice that meets their standard and is good enough. Satisficers do not feel, as maximizers do, that they must continue to search until they find the best choice. The satisficer’s search will end much sooner than the maximizer’s search.

Maximizers tend to be less satisfied with their choices and tend to second guess themselves after they have made a choice. Schwartz (2004) said that “the difference between the two types is that the satisficer is content with merely excellent as opposed to the absolute best” (p. 78). Schwartz suggested that satisficers are happier with their choices and that maximizers would be happier if they could move towards becoming satisficers. Schwartz suggested that if people could be satisfied with “good enough,” they would be better off than seeking “the best” (p. 5). Schwartz stated that “the fact that *some* choice is good doesn’t necessarily mean that *more* choice is better” (p. 3).

Schwartz (2004) noted that maximizers may be less satisfied with their choice as they will wonder if there was a better choice if only they had looked longer. Maximizers tend to take longer to make a decision, spend more time comparing their decisions with

those others have made, are more likely to feel regret after making a choice, and are less positive about their decisions (p. 83). Sara, one of the parents in the focus groups, considered and visited 18 schools. Sara, a maximizer, considered every possible school in her zone and, even after making her school choice for her kindergarten daughter, said she would continue to monitor her child's progress in school and would not rule out making a change later. Like Sara, Delores is a maximizer. She also considered every school in her priority zone except for the one school which did not provide transportation.

Although a few parents in this study indicated they were looking at other school options because of dissatisfaction with their base school, the majority of parents in this study were seeking rather than fleeing. Parents want their children to be excited about school, to experience different activities, to be able to take electives, to be challenged and not bored, and to be able to advance and not be held back. Parents want a school that has the resources to address the individual needs of their child and teachers who will work with their child. Parents want to feel confident the school they choose will meet the individual interests and needs of their children.

Parents want a school that is "a good fit" for their child and want their children to feel a sense of belonging in the school. Parents seek a school with a program that will provide additional opportunities for learning. They seek a school that has many options, so students can pursue their changing interests through a variety of activities. Parents are seeking something "extra" in a school. As one parent stated in expressing this view, "I didn't want the normal. I wanted a little bit more than the normal."

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study suggest a number of possible actions school districts

could take to attract parents to consider and choose magnet schools.

**Showcase positive features of magnet schools in the district marketing plan.**

Some of the features that survey and focus group participants cited as features they like about charter and private schools such as challenging academic programs, electives, and specialized curriculum such as Spanish immersion, Montessori, and visual arts are also features of magnet schools. Parents attracted to private and charter schools mentioned they like a small school and small classes. Interestingly, some of the parents who chose magnet schools often mentioned the “small school feeling” of a magnet school.

When publicizing attributes of magnet schools, the school district should highlight these features in their marketing plan. The district and school websites, magnet fairs, informational sessions, and school tours should emphasize these attractive features so that parents considering charter or private schools will realize that the features they find attractive about charter and private schools are also features of magnet schools.

**Emphasize the importance of school tours as a recruitment strategy.** The findings of this study reveal the significant impact school tours have on parent school choice. The district should place a concerted effort on the design and execution of individual school tours. Principals, magnet coordinators, school staff, parents, and students should be involved in planning school tours which will impress parent visitors with the positive features of magnet schools. Schools that received high ratings by survey respondents could provide a leadership role by sharing details of their success with school tours and by assisting other magnet schools with planning their tours.

**Provide opportunities for prospective magnet school parents to meet with current magnet school parents.** The source of information receiving the highest

ranking in this study was other people. Word of mouth from family, friends, school staff, and people in parent social networks contribute to prospective magnet school parent perceptions of magnet schools. The district should determine new ways to harness the power of magnet school staff and current magnet school parents to share information, respond to questions, and discuss the benefits of magnet schools with parents considering a magnet school.

**Increase recruitment at preschools.** This study indicated that parents are beginning their school search earlier and that many start looking at schools at least a year before their children are in kindergarten. By focusing a concerted effort on recruitment at local preschools, the district could provide greater awareness to prospective kindergarten parents of the attractive features of magnet schools.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study took place in one large urban school district. The findings of this study are thus limited to this one school district and the results may not be generalizable beyond this particular school district. Because of the low percentage of survey respondents and the small number of focus group participants, the results may not be truly representative of the population of all magnet school choosers. Participants in the focus groups were all volunteers who were willing to travel to the district office and spend time sharing their experiences.

While there was some racial diversity in the focus group sample, including one African-American and two Hispanics, the majority of the focus group participants were Caucasian. All but one of the participants was female. The parents who participated in the focus groups in this study have children in five of the 12 schools located in the

downtown area and may not be representative of parents whose children attend the other seven magnet schools in the downtown area or in the other 34 magnet schools in the district. The participants may thus not be representative of all kindergarten magnet school parents.

There is a possibility that participants did not respond honestly in responding to the questions asked on the survey and in the focus groups; however, some of the parents in the focus groups shared very personal details which led the researcher to believe they were being very honest and truthful. The researcher felt there was a level of trust between parents in the focus groups and the researcher. Parents seemed very open and honest in their responses.

There is a possibility that bias may be present in the discussion of the findings. The researcher has strong beliefs in the important role of magnet schools in the effective desegregation of schools and in providing innovation and valuable learning opportunities to students who choose to attend magnet schools. As principal of two successful magnet high schools, the researcher saw the benefits of magnet schools and the positive results for students who would willingly leave their base school to take advantage of programs and opportunities available in a magnet school. In conducting the focus groups and in reporting the findings of this study, the researcher may have unintentionally shown bias towards magnet schools which may have impacted the results and the discussion.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Because of the increase in school choice in this country, there is a need for additional research on parent preferences and the impact of parent choice. Some suggestions for further study include the following:

1. Studies on how parents determine the initial set of schools to consider, how they eliminate schools from their school search, and how they determine their final choice. Research studies could examine the critical factors parents think about when deciding whether or not to include a particular school on their list of schools to consider in their school search.
2. This study only involved kindergarten parents as participants in the focus groups. Additional studies could include focus groups with parents of students at other critical junctures in school transition, middle school and high school, to determine if the process of choosing a middle school or a high school is similar to choosing a school for a kindergarten student or if the factors that influence school choice are different at different transition periods in schooling. Learning more from fifth-grade and eighth-grade parents would provide understanding of what parents are looking for in their choice of a middle school or a high school for their child.
3. Studies which include students as well as parents in the discussion of the school choice process would provide a student perspective as well as the parent perspective on school choice decision-making. Studies could address questions such as the following: How important is the student voice in the selection of a middle or high school? Who makes the ultimate decision? Is it the parent or the child or is the decision a mutual one?
4. Are parents who spent considerable time and effort on researching schools more likely to be satisfied with their school choice decision than parents who spent a limited amount of time on their school search? How do parents assess

the effectiveness of their research?

5. Studies of parents who chose a charter school rather than a magnet school or a traditional public school would provide another perspective on school choice. What are the sources of information they used and what were the key factors in their decision to choose a charter school?
6. How important is parent involvement in the satisfaction of choice of school?
7. How significant is principal and school staff involvement in magnet school recruitment?

### **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to highlight the major findings of this study of parent choice of a magnet school in a large urban school district, summarize the answers to the three research questions, and discuss what was learned about parent perspectives of school choice. In addition, implications for practice were proposed, limitations of the study described, and suggested recommendations for future research presented.

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Appendix A

Anonymous Magnet and Early College Applicants Survey 2017-2018



**Magnet and Early College Applicants Survey 2017-18**

**You are receiving this survey because you applied to a magnet program and/or early college for the 2018-19 school year. By completing this survey you will help us better understand the experience families had researching and selecting a magnet school or early college. We want to know your opinions about the application process! Your feedback is important to us and your responses are confidential. The survey should take 5-10 minutes to complete. Thank you for participating!**

## Magnet and Early College Applicants Survey 2017-18

1. What grade level will the applicant(s) be in next year? Please check all that apply.

- Elementary
- Middle
- High

2. Which of the following information events did you attend? Please check all that apply.

- Early College School Fair in October
- Magnet, Early College and Year-Round Fair in November
- Magnet Mini-Fair for families with rising kindergarten students in January
- School Tours and Events
- Magnet Middle School Evening Information Sessions for rising middle school students in December
- Parent information sessions at the Magnet Programs Office
- Visit to the Magnet Programs Office
- Magnet information session at your base school, preschool, or parent group
- Social Media - Facebook Live
- Other, please specify

3. How influential were the following sources of information in your initial choice of particular magnet and/or Early College schools to visit?

	Not influential	Somewhat influential	Very influential
School website	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
School brochure	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Personal recommendation from friends or former students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Recommendation from staff member at your current school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
School test score data	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Magnet Explorer website tool	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Media stories of the school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4. How many magnet and/or Early College schools did you visit?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- More than 3

5. Please rate the overall quality of the school tour and/or school event at the magnet and/or Early College schools you visited? Please check all schools that you visited. (Elementary schools are listed first, then middle and high).

	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
A	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
B	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
C	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
D	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
E	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
F	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
G	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
H	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
J	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
K	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
L	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
M	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
N	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
O	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
P	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Q	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
R	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
S	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
T	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
U	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
V	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
W	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
X	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Y	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Z	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. To how many magnet programs did you apply (not including Early Colleges or year-round schools)?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

7. To how many Early College schools did you apply?

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

8. To which magnet schools and/or Early College schools did you apply? Please check all schools to which you applied. (Elementary schools are listed first, then middle and high).

- A
- B
- C
- D
- E
- F
- G
- H
- I
- J
- K
- L
- M
- N
- O
- P
- Q
- R
- S
- T
- U
- V
- W
- X
- Y
- Z

9. Please rate the importance of the following factors in your decision to apply to a particular magnet program and/or Early College school?

	Not important	Somewhat important	Very important
Magnet program theme	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
School reputation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Impressions of the school leadership	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Diversity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
School assignment stability	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pathway to a preferred magnet middle and/or high school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Distance to the school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Dissatisfaction with base/calendar options	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Opportunities for parental involvement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

10. In addition to magnet and Early College schools, did you apply to any of the other school options available in the community? Please check all that apply.

- Charter school
- Private school
- Home school
- None

11. If you applied to a charter or private school, what features of these schools attracted you?

12. Please rate the online magnet selection software in terms of ease of use, functionality, and user-friendliness.

Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

13. Do you have any suggestions for improving the magnet selection software?

14. In order for Magnet Programs to share information effectively, what are your suggestions for communicating news and events? Please check all that apply.

- Radio
- TV
- Postcard mailing
- Newspaper/Magazine
- E-mail
- Website
- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
- Phone message
- Other, please specify

15. In addition to the magnet themes currently offered, what other innovative themes/programs would interest you?

16. If you could point to one experience, conversation, or piece of information from your search for a magnet and/or Early College school that helped you make your final choice, what would it be? Please explain.

17. Please feel free to share any other observations and opinions about magnet programs and/or Early College schools.



Appendix B

Focus Group Questions

### Focus Group Questions

1. Please tell me about your decision to apply to a magnet school.
2. As you were going through the school selection process, where did you get your information?
3. What sources of information were most useful?
4. What factors were important in your choice of a magnet school? What was the most important factor to you in choosing a magnet school for your child?
5. Did you consider a charter school or a private school? If so, what features of the charter school or private school appealed to you?
6. Why did you decide to choose a magnet school for your child??
7. Is there anything else you'd like to share?