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Making School Choice Work

By Michael DeArmond, Ashley Jochim, and Robin Lake

CRPE

REINVENTING
PUBLIC EDUCATION

About This Report

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE CENTER ON REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America's disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families.

Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools.

CRPE is a self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington. Our work is funded through private philanthropic dollars, federal grants, and contracts.

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Summary

In many American cities, school choice is no longer only for families who can exercise it by buying a house near a good public school or paying for private school. Many parents have options beyond their neighborhood school, including traditional public schools in other neighborhoods, charter schools, and even schools in nearby school districts. However it manifests in a particular city, school choice is increasingly the new normal in urban education and shows no sign of going away.

The key question facing civic and education leaders, then, isn't whether school choice will shape city school systems, but how. If leaders want to make school choice work for all families, they need more than just studies of whether charter or voucher programs are outperforming district schools; they need to know whether their city's overall supply of schools is getting better quickly, and whether parents are happy with their choices and can navigate them easily. Leaders need a broader understanding of what's actually happening where school choice has moved from the margins to the mainstream, including the opportunities and challenges choice brings and under what conditions.

This report is the first in a series that addresses how cities with a significant amount of school choice can ensure it works for more families. This report kicks off the series by focusing on how parents experience public education in cities where residence is no longer the primary driver of a child's school assignment.

Based on a survey of 4,000 public school parents in eight cities and in-depth field visits in four of those cities, our findings suggest that families from all walks of life, not just the most advantaged, are actively choosing their children's schools. As a parent in Detroit told us, "We're making choices because we want something better for our kids."

But we also found that many parents—especially those in the most disadvantaged circumstances—face barriers that limit their ability to choose a school for their child, including inadequate information, lack of convenient transportation, and uneven school quality. These issues affect parents regardless of whether their children attend a public charter school or a traditional district school.

Addressing problems that cut across district and charter schools will not be easy. As we illustrate with an analysis of oversight structures in 35 high-choice cities, city school systems are often governed by a patchwork of school districts, charter authorizers, and charter school operators. This state of affairs makes it difficult for city leaders to address crosscutting issues (such as parent information systems or transportation) that affect everyone but are no one's responsibility.

Addressing these problems when no one is in charge will require vision and action from leaders who are more committed to improving outcomes for children than they are to particular institutional arrangements. It will require moving beyond narrow debates about charters versus districts, or choice versus neighborhood schools, and toward pragmatic, crosscutting solutions.

State and local leaders with real authority and leverage must push, pull, and motivate various actors so that citywide:

- Every neighborhood has great public school options.
- Children have safe passage and free or affordable transportation to schools.
- Families have access to information on all public schools so they can make informed choices.
- Enrollment decisions are fair and transparent.

- Children and families facing the most challenges have extra support and equitable access to good schools.

- Low-performing schools improve or are replaced with better options.

Some cities have been able to make progress toward these goals when government and community leaders come together to work out voluntary agreements on citywide systems for enrollment and information to help families navigate public school choice. Other cities are finding ways to get promising new charter schools to locate in the neighborhoods that need them most.

In many cities, however, the situation is too dire to wait for people to come together voluntarily. In those cases, state leaders, mayors, and others need to change state and local laws to ensure that districts and charter authorizers oversee schools responsibly and that families do not face large barriers to choice, such as inadequate transportation. In other cases, formal governance changes may be necessary to reduce the number of authorizers involved, take away some agencies' authority to open new schools, or create specialized agencies or interagency agreements to oversee and administer citywide systems that facilitate choice.

In the coming years, we will be studying how these and other approaches are playing out in urban school systems across the country: where they succeed, where they fail, and under what conditions they seem to be most effective. In the fall of 2014, we will release more detailed findings across the cities we studied, with an analysis of how parents' experiences vary city by city. We will also release a book that proposes a new governance model that redefines local school boards so that they can focus on, and be accountable for, ensuring all families have great public school options.[1]

Regardless of the solution, we believe that only by elevating the nation's vision of urban public education to include all public schools will civic and education leaders be able to do what is necessary to make choice work for more families and ensure it delivers on its promise to improve public education for every child.

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1. Paul Hill and Ashley Jochim, *A Democratic Constitution for Public Education* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming fall 2014).

Introduction

In many cities across America, school choice is no longer reserved for families who can exercise it by buying a home near a good school or paying for private school. Today, families of any income level can often choose among schools within their district, schools in nearby districts, and independently operated charter schools. In many cities, including Detroit, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C., enrollments in public schools of choice far exceed those in traditional neighborhood-based programs.

The question facing civic and education leaders today isn't whether school choice will shape city school systems, but how. Prior research suggests reasons for both optimism and concern: parents are generally satisfied with choice, and students in choice schools can benefit academically, but choice also has the potential to increase social stratification when the most disadvantaged families are the least likely to choose.[2]

Leaders who want to realize the benefits of school choice and temper its risks need more than a summary assessment of whether choice improves the educational opportunities of individual students. They need a broad understanding of what's actually happening in cities where choice has moved from the margins to the mainstream, including the opportunities and challenges it brings and the conditions under which it might work better or worse.

This report is the first in a series that addresses how cities with significant amounts of school choice can ensure all families have public schools that work for them. We begin with this question: how do parents experience public education in cities where residence is no longer the primary driver of a child's school assignment?

To answer it, we surveyed 4,000 public school parents in eight cities, analyzed administrative data on the agencies charged with overseeing public schools in a larger sample of 35 cities, and conducted in-depth fieldwork in four cities. The results suggest the following:

- First, families from all walks of life in urban America are choosing schools, not just the most advantaged. As a parent in Detroit told us, "We're making choices because we want something better for our kids."[3]

- Second, many parents—especially those in the most disadvantaged circumstances—face barriers that limit their ability to choose a school for their child, including inadequate information, lack of convenient transportation, and uneven school quality. These issues affect parents regardless of whether their children attend a public charter school or a traditional district school.

2. For a review of the research on school choice, see Paul Teske and Mark Schneider, "What Research Can Tell Policymakers About School Choice," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 20, no. 4 (2001): 609-631.

3. All quotes in this report come from interviews the authors conducted in the winter and spring of 2014.

- Third, improving this state of affairs will not be easy. In education governance today, responsibility for the oversight of city schools is fragmented across multiple agencies. Each agency sets its own expectations for providers and may or may not be located in the same city as the schools it is responsible for, making it difficult for leaders to address crosscutting issues, such as school quality, that affect everyone but are no one's responsibility.

This report has three parts. We begin by describing the challenges facing parents in one of the nation's most troubled big cities: Detroit. Detroit's education landscape vividly reveals how the expansion of school choice does not automatically drive widespread improvements in public education. But more than this, Detroit shows how making choice work for all families is extremely difficult when no one takes—or is given—responsibility for ensuring quality citywide.

In part two, we put the experiences of parents in Detroit in a broader context using an original survey of 4,000 public school parents in eight cities. In part three, we put Detroit's

governance challenges in a broader context by describing formal governance structures in a sample of 35 high-choice cities. In both cases, the results suggest that, although Detroit is admittedly an extreme case, other cities face similar challenges, just on a smaller scale.

For school choice advocates, this report paints a cautionary picture: although the expansion of choice in American cities has clearly empowered many parents and provided their children an escape from chronically low-performing schools, leaders today need to face crosscutting access and quality problems that get in the way of all families benefiting from choice. Given the state of education governance in many big cities, where agencies charged with overseeing public schools operate independently, addressing these problems requires new thinking and strategies.

The message here is that making choice work for more families requires moving beyond narrow debates about charters versus districts, or choice versus neighborhood schools, and toward broader solutions that seek to improve all public school parents' ability to choose their children's schools with confidence.

Looking for Options in Detroit

In January 2014, researchers from the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) met with a dozen parents in Detroit to learn about their experiences with education in the city. What follows is one of many similar stories we heard.

Ms. Gordon is a lifelong Detroit resident.[4] Her 11-year-old son will enter middle school in the fall of 2014 and she is anxious about how to find and choose his next school. He has not had an easy time in elementary school; he struggled academically and was often in trouble for his behavior. Over the years, she has tried to talk to the principal and her son's teachers, but it always felt like no one was listening to her concerns or willing to work with her to address them. Now as she's looking for a middle school, she's clear that she wants her son to have a fresh start and a chance to get the kind of academic and social support that he needs. A friend suggested she look at a charter school that her daughter attends. The school sounded interesting, but Ms. Gordon decided it was too far away for her son to travel to safely on his own. Even if she could find a safe route, she was disappointed to read in a parent guide that the kids at the charter school actually weren't doing any better than those at the low-performing neighborhood middle school.[5] In fact, few schools looked like good options, even though there were many to choose from. As she faced spring enrollment decisions at the time we talked to her, she felt like she was no closer to finding a school that would be a good fit for her son. She expressed frustration and despair, recounting her efforts. "It just feels like you have to fight for your kids every day in this city, because no one else will," said Ms. Gordon.

THE CHALLENGE FOR PARENTS

Detroit is a city of choice. Today, fewer than half of the city's public school students attend a school assigned to them based on where they live. Instead, families choose among charter schools, magnet schools, district schools, and schools in nearby districts.[6]

Parents in Detroit often struggle to navigate the city's complex education marketplace. For parents like Ms. Gordon, a lack of information, confusing paperwork, and transportation gaps all make it hard to find a school that will work for their child. Parents told us you have to be a "fighter" if you want to find a good school in Detroit—no one is there to help. If parents like Ms. Gordon have a tough time, imagine if she did not speak English or had a student with disabilities. "There are no watchdogs in Detroit to make sure parents [of children with special needs] get what they need from schools," said a charter school leader. "They're on their own."

The challenges of navigating choice in Detroit are made more complicated by the hypercompetitive environment for students. With a dwindling student population, Detroit's schools are in an all-out battle for enrollment numbers. A parent advocate called the competition for students a "snatch and grab."[7] A district official likened it to "guerilla warfare," with door-to-door battle plans for student recruitment.[8] Competition between schools is so fierce

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4. Not her real name. Parent interview subjects were promised anonymity as part of their participation in this study.

5. Excellent Schools Detroit, a coalition of philanthropic, education, and community leaders, began grading publicly funded schools based on school climate and performance data in 2012.

6. In 2014, CRPE conducted a survey of public school parents in eight cities, including Detroit. The city results will be published in a report in fall 2014.

7. Mark Niquette, "Detroit Schools Fight for Market Share with Kids as Commodities," *Bloomberg,* December 18, 2013.

8. Also see Chastity Pratt Dawsey, "DPS's Door-to-Door Campaign Aims to Tout Individual Schools to Win Back Students," *Detroit Free Press,* August 14, 2013.

that charter schools in the same charter network say they sometimes fight over students. Other school leaders say they worry about fending off schools that might open nearby.

"The market is saturated," a charter school leader said, "but they keep on coming, and no one is shutting down the bad ones."

The biggest challenge facing parents like Ms. Gordon is not a lack of choice but a lack of good schools. Excellent Schools Detroit (ESD), a nonprofit organization that collects and publishes performance data and rates schools in the city, gave just 16 percent of the city's public schools (district or charter) a C+ or better in 2014. While the city has more than 250 schools, the city's Eastside and Westside neighborhoods have just 10 quality K–8 programs between them; some neighborhoods have no schools with a passing grade (see **Figure 1**).[9]

Figure 1. Low-Performing Schools Are Widespread in Detroit
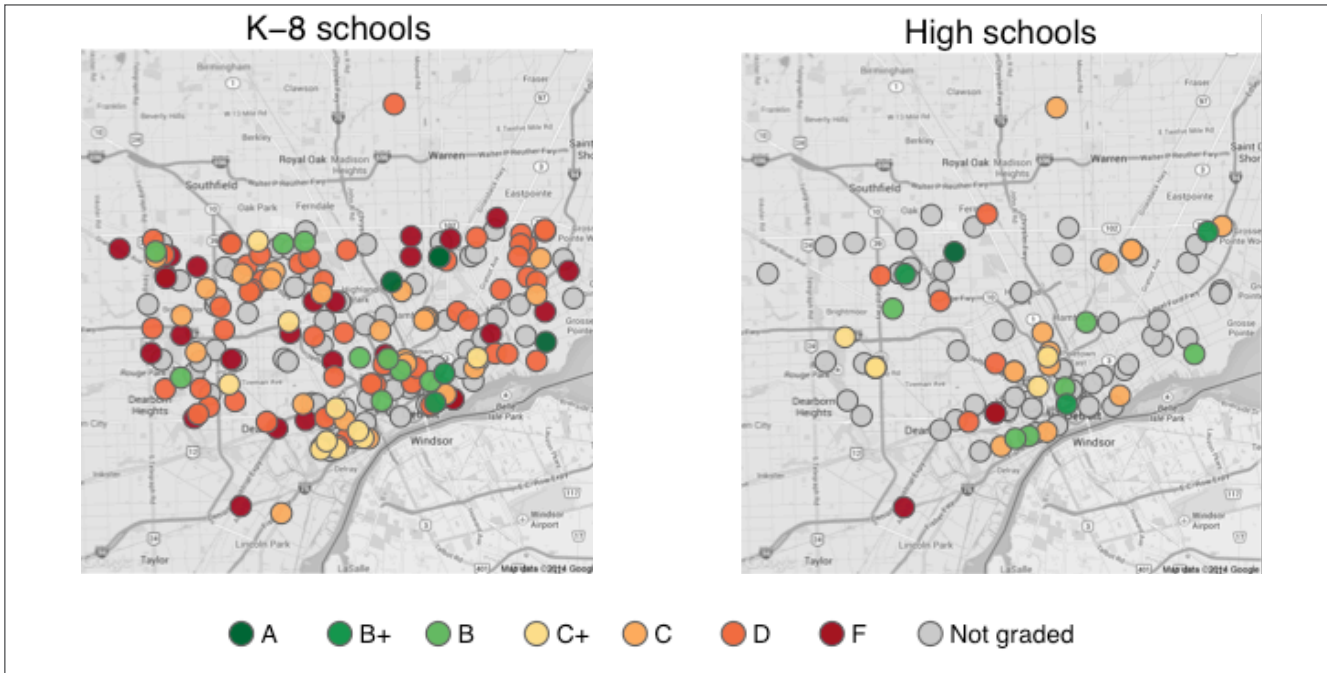
Source: Excellent Schools Detroit, 2014 Scorecard.

Poor performance plagues schools in both Detroit Public Schools (DPS) and the city's large charter sector. The percentage of DPS students who are proficient in either math or reading on the National Assessment for Educational Progress has been flat since 2009; just 4 percent of 4th grade students were proficient in math and 7 percent in reading in 2013 (see **Figure 2**). The results put the district far behind other city school districts and the nation.[10]

9. ESD grades schools on the basis of academic status, academic progress, and school climate. Schools that are missing data for all measures in the academic status or progress categories are not eligible for a cumulative grade.

10. National Center for Education Statistics, *A First Look: 2013 Mathematics and Reading Trial Urban District Assessment* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2013).

Figure 2. Detroit Public Schools Struggle with Performance
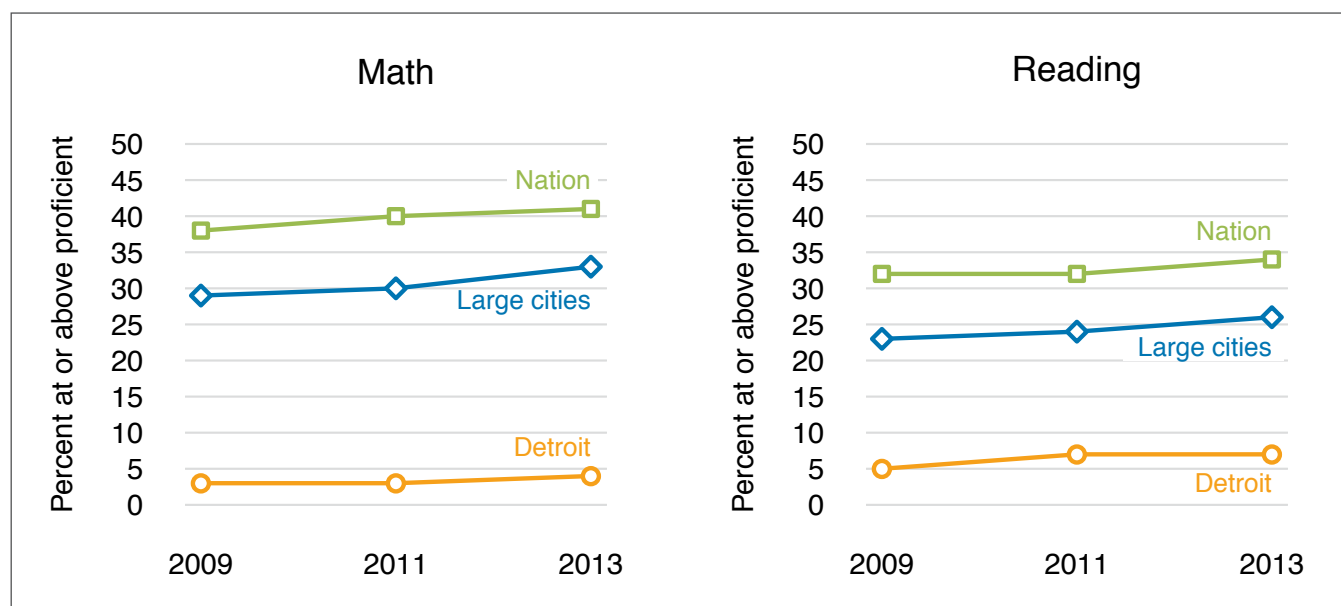
Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2013.

Charter schools offer only slightly more hope. According to the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University, Detroit's charter schools outperform district schools, but given the very low bar, that's not too difficult. Just under half of Detroit's charter schools have better outcomes than traditional district schools in reading and math.[11] The CREDO analysis also shows that low-income students in charter schools make only modest achievement gains (less than a month of additional learning in math each year) and that English language learners and special education students actually learn less in charter schools than their peers do in traditional public schools.[12]

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR MAKING THINGS BETTER?

Whose job is it to fix the problems facing parents in Detroit? Our interviews with leaders in the city suggest that no one knows the answer. It is not the state, which defers oversight to local education agencies and charter authorizers. It is not DPS, which views charters as a threat to its survival. It is not charter school authorizers, who are only responsible for ensuring that the schools they sponsor comply with the state's charter school law. It is not the mayor, who thus far sees education as beyond his purview. And it is not the schools themselves, who only want to fill their seats and serve the children they enroll.

No one has responsibility for ensuring quality citywide. Throughout Michigan, public universities, community colleges, intermediate school districts, and all traditional K–12 districts can authorize an unlimited number of charter schools.[13] Each authorizer has different standards for approving and closing schools, and the quality of their schools varies widely.[14] Only one of Detroit's charter authorizers is local (DPS); the rest have headquarters outside of the city.[15] The governor further complicated the picture in 2011 by creating the Education Achievement Authority (EAA), a new agency that operates outside of the district and charter sectors, to take over 12 failing schools.[16] No one in Detroit is responsible for ensuring that all neighborhoods and students have quality options or that parents have the information and resources they need to choose a school.

11. According to Stanford's CREDO study of Detroit charter schools, 47 percent of Detroit charter schools are better in reading and 49 percent are better in math at levels that are statistically significant. CREDO, *Charter School Performance in Michigan* (Stanford: CREDO, 2013).

12. Ibid.

13. In 2011, the Michigan legislature passed and the governor signed a bill that ended the cap on charter schools for Michigan's higher education institutions. Beginning in 2015, these authorizers can sponsor an unlimited number of schools.

14. Charter school authorizers vary by as much as three standard deviations in achieved proficiency. See Liyang Mao and Bettie Landauer-Menchik, *A Comparison of Michigan's Charter School Authorizers* (East Lansing, MI: Education Policy Center, 2012).

15. As of the 2011–2012 school year, the following authorizers sponsored schools in the Detroit city limits: Ferris State University, Saniaw Valley State University, Bay Mills Community College, Oakland University, Eastern Michigan University, Grand Valley State University, Lake Superior State University, Central Michigan University, and Detroit Public Schools.

16. At present writing, the Michigan legislature is debating whether to expand the EAA, which has lost more than 25 percent of its students since inception. See Kathleen Gray, "Education Achievement Authority Expansion Bill Clears Senate," *Detroit Free Press,* December 11, 2013.

"It's a free-for-all," one observer said. "We have all these crummy schools around, and nobody can figure out how to get quality back under control...Detroit hasn't set the conditions to make school choice work for families and kids."

Unfortunately, there are few incentives and little capacity for doing better. The state has the authority to close charter schools and revoke an authorizer's license but has never used it. If authorizers open schools where they are not needed or allow poor-performing schools to remain open, nothing happens. In 2012, the legislature seemingly weakened its oversight of the charter sector by eliminating a requirement that

the state education agency report on charter school quality each year.[17] At the local level, few schools or authorizers are willing do anything that might threaten their ability to attract and retain families.

Detroit is a powerful illustration of what happens when no one takes responsibility for the entire system of publicly supported schools in a city. Parents struggle to navigate their many, mostly low-performing options, and providers face at best weak incentives to improve academic quality. As a result, large numbers of failing district and charter schools can persist indefinitely.

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17. See Office of Education Improvement and Innovation – Public School Academies, "State Board Authority Over PSAs" (Lansing, MI: Michigan Department of Education, 2009).

Detroit's Parents Aren't Alone

The case of Detroit illustrates how hard it can be for families to choose a good school for their children. Confronted by schools of uneven quality, a confusing sea of information, a fragmented enrollment system, and limited transportation options, parents face an uphill struggle when it comes to finding a school that works for them.

How unusual is Detroit? How are parents elsewhere faring in an increasingly complex and competitive education marketplace? How do they view their education options? What barriers do they face in choosing schools? In sum, what are the opportunities and challenges facing American families in cities with school choice?

To address these questions, we surveyed 4,000 public school parents in the spring of 2014 in eight cities: Baltimore, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Indianapolis, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. We selected these cities for their large public school choice programs and their distinctive oversight arrangements—in some, virtually all public schools are overseen by a school district (Baltimore, Denver, and Philadelphia) and in others, oversight is divided among multiple actors (Cleveland, Detroit, Indianapolis, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C.).

Overall, the survey results suggest that parents, including half of those who lack a high school diploma, are choosing a school other than the one assigned to them based on residence. But they have limited options, and many, especially the most disadvantaged, face barriers that prevent them from choosing more broadly.

Survey Methodology

In each city, we randomly selected 500 public school parents to participate in the survey, using a combination of landline and cell phone numbers. We weighted the sample data using Census-based population estimates for age, race, and educational attainment. The survey questionnaire covered a range of topics, including whether parents were assigned or chose a school, how satisfied they were with their school, what they thought of their options, and what got in the way of finding a good choice for their child. The verbatim questions used in this survey, as well as descriptive statistics for the sample, are shown in the appendices. All survey responses have a confidence range of +/- 1.5 percent.

CHOICE IS WIDESPREAD

The majority of parents in the eight cities we surveyed reported that their child was enrolled in a school other than the one assigned to them based on their residence (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3. Choice Is Widespread

55% of parents chose a school

49% with high school or less

59% with some college or more
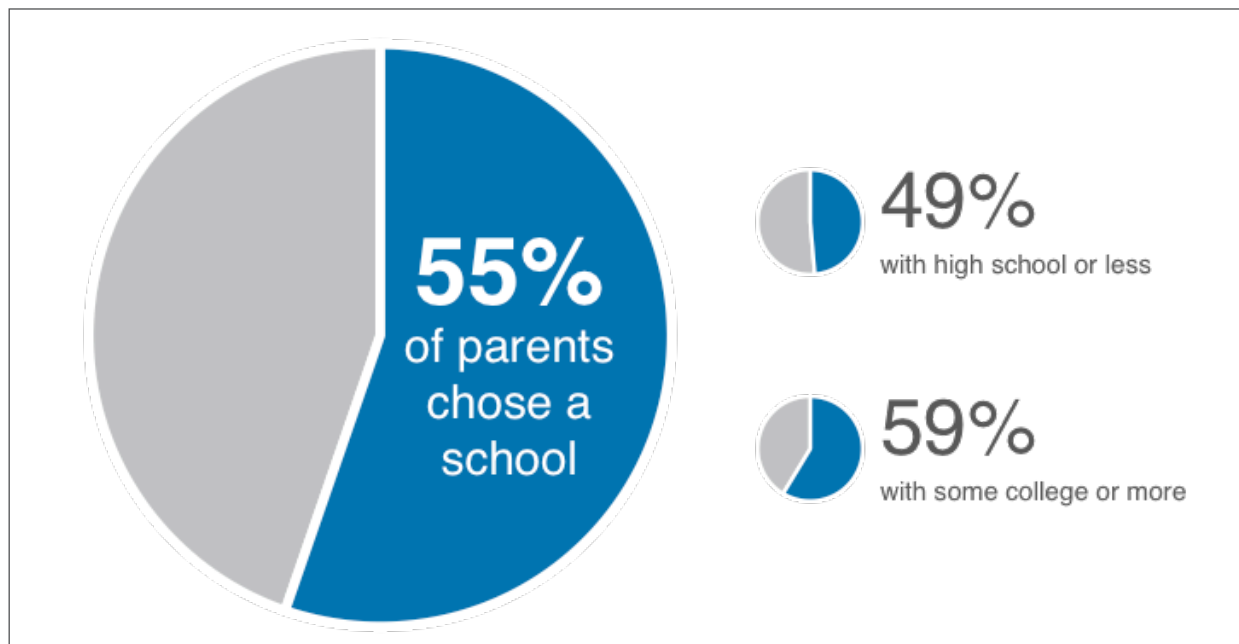
Consistent with prior research,[18] we found that parents with higher levels of education are more likely to exercise choice.[19] But we also found that 49 percent of parents with less than a high school diploma reported choosing a school, too, suggesting that choice is common also among parents with less education and presumably fewer resources to invest in the choice process (see **Figure 3**).

A majority of parents said they considered just one or two schools when they chose their school. Overall, 37 percent of parents said they considered only one option and 24 percent considered two options. Seventy-five percent of parents—including in assigned schools—said their child was enrolled in the school that was their first or second choice (see **Figure 4**).

Figure 4. Most Parents Enrolled in Their First or Second Choice but Considered Only a Few Options

75% enrolled in 1st or 2nd choice

Number of schools considered

- 6 or more — 4%
- 3 to 5 — 34%
- 2 — 24%
- 1 — 37%
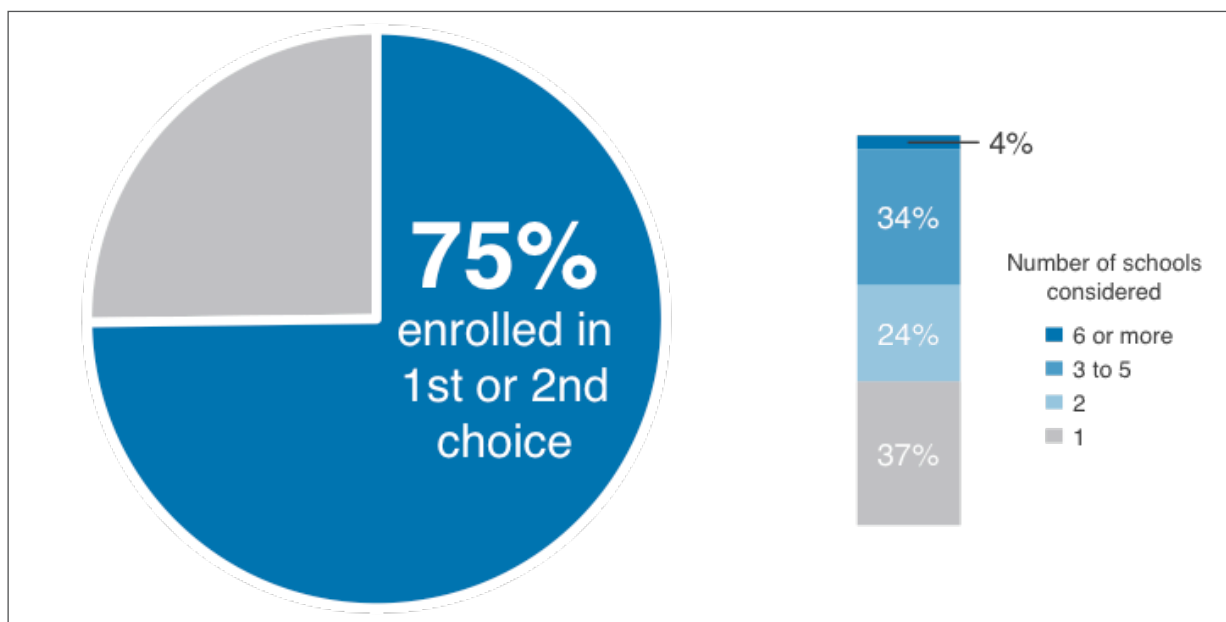
18. For example, see Teske and Schneider, "What Research Can Tell Policymakers About School Choice."

19. Approximately 11 percent of survey respondents did not answer a question about income. As a result, we used parental education status to consider the effect of socioeconomic status on choice behavior.

BUT PARENTS DON'T HAVE MANY OPTIONS

While most parents said they were currently enrolled in their first or second choice, the fact that most only considered one or two options suggests that they may not have had many options to choose from. Indeed, nearly half of the parents surveyed said that if their current school wasn't available, there were no other schools available that they would be just as happy for their children to attend (see **Figure 5**).

Consistent with the idea that parents lack options, **Figure 5** also shows that a large share of parents (42 percent) said that choosing was difficult because they couldn't find schools that were a good fit for their child. This was especially an issue for parents whose children have special needs, 48 percent of whom said finding a good fit made choosing a school more difficult.

MANY FACE BARRIERS TO CHOOSING

We also asked parents about six things that could make it harder for them to choose a school for their child: getting information about schools, understanding which schools they are eligible to enroll in, filling out multiple applications, submitting multiple applications on time, confusing paperwork, and getting their child to and from school every day. **Figure 6** shows the percentage of parents who identified each issue as a barrier to choosing.

As **Figure 6** shows, parents most often cited the following barriers: understanding which schools their child was eligible to attend (33 percent), getting transportation to and from school (26 percent), and getting information about schools (25 percent). It is especially significant that parents highlight understanding eligibility as a barrier, given that most children in the surveyed cities are eligible to attend all publicly funded schools of choice. Without a good understanding of who is eligible to attend a school of choice, parents may not apply to a school, even if it offers a higher-quality program. Interestingly, parents did not say that enrollment-related issues were big

Figure 5. Parents Want More from School Choice

47% no other option they'd be happy with

42% available schools were not a good fit
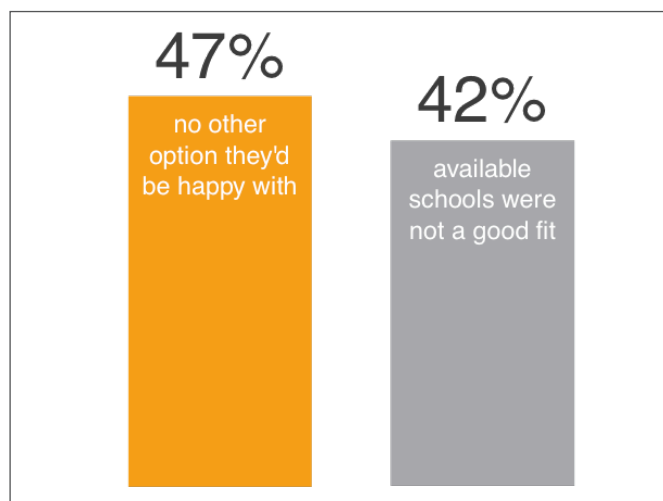
barriers to choosing a school: only 21 percent cited multiple application deadlines, 17 percent cited the number of applications, and 14 percent cited paperwork as making choosing a school more difficult.

Certain barriers appear to be bigger problems for some parents than they are for others. Compared to their college-educated peers, parents with less than a high school diploma are significantly more likely to cite all of the barriers in **Figure 6.** For example, 40 percent of parents with less than a high school diploma cited problems understanding which schools their child was eligible to attend compared to 24 percent for parents with a BA or more. Less-educated parents were 72 percent more likely to cite transportation as a barrier and 58 percent more likely to cite problems getting the information they needed to make a choice than more educated parents. Less-educated parents were also significantly more likely to identify challenges with the enrollment process, including confusing paperwork, different applications, and different application deadlines.

Figure 6. Many Families Face Barriers to Exercising Choice
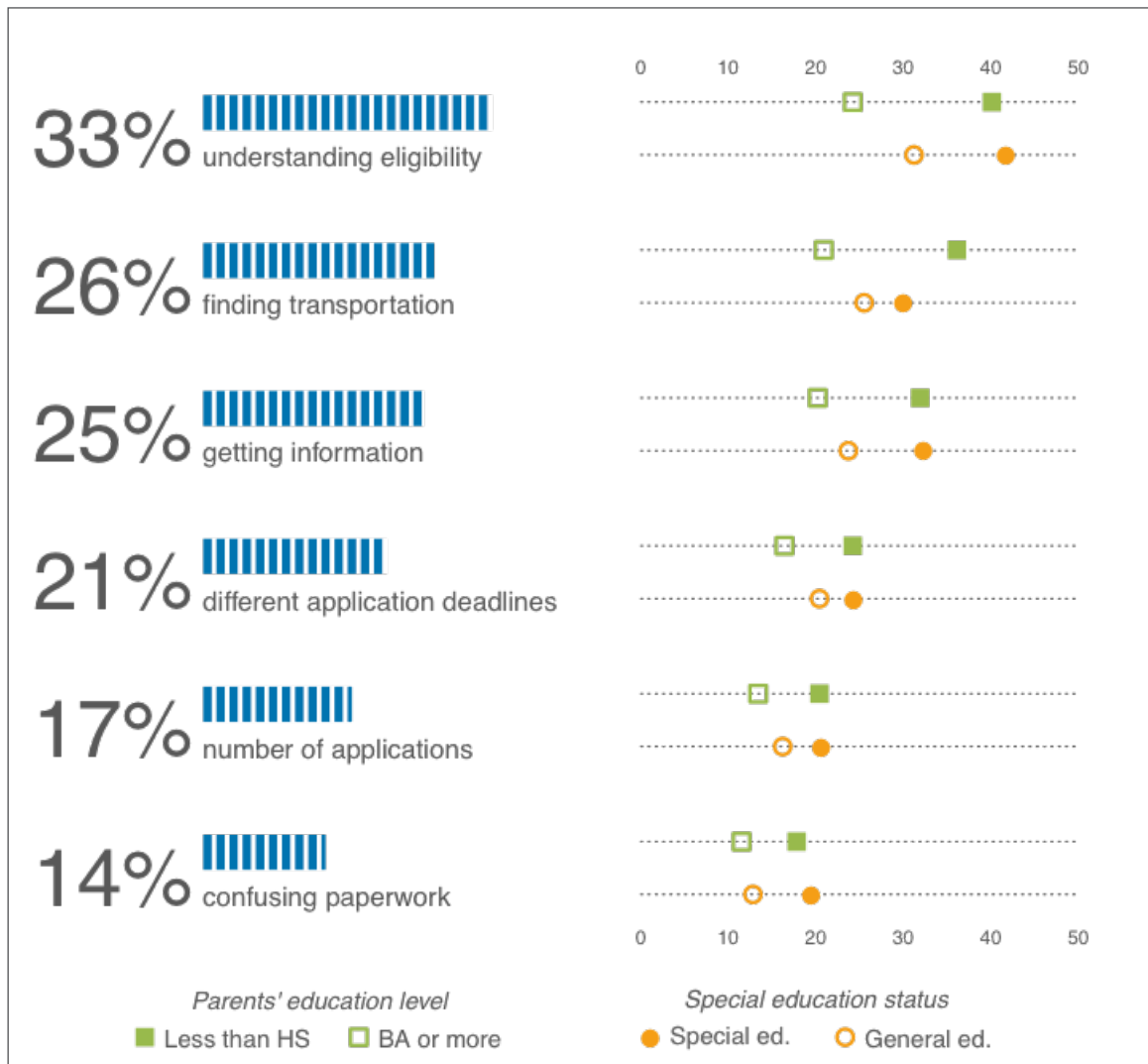
Parents of children with special needs also were more likely to report barriers than other parents. Parents of children with special needs were 33 percent more likely to struggle to understand whether their child was eligible to attend a school, 18 percent more likely to cite transportation as a barrier, and 36 percent more likely to find it difficult to get information to make a good choice compared to parents of general education students. Parents of children with special needs were also more likely to identify other issues as barriers, with 20 percent citing confusing paperwork, 21 percent identifying the large number of applications, and 24 percent citing different application deadlines.

In short, compared to others, parents with less formal education and families who have a child with special needs face more difficulty in navigating the public education systems in the eight survey cities.

So far, these findings suggest that many parents are choosing a school for their child, but many also have limited options and struggle to find the information and transportation they need to choose with confidence. These barriers affect parents regardless of whether they decide to send their children to a charter school or a traditional school. Importantly, the least advantaged parents struggle the most.

More coherent systems of enrollment, transportation, and information might make it easier for all parents to choose and increase the pressure on schools to improve the quality of their academic programming. But as we show in the next section, who might take responsibility for building those systems is far from clear in many cities.

Who's in Charge?

Who is responsible for ensuring that choice produces a good set of options for families in urban education? For Detroit and many other cities, the answer to this question is no longer the traditional public school district. Increasingly, a range of agencies and organizations—including local school districts, state agencies, charter school authorizers, and nonprofit providers—oversee and operate schools in American cities. These groups compete for students and often have few incentives to cooperate on crosscutting issues that shape how school choice works (or does not work) for families. The result can be a system of public schools that is difficult for families to navigate and for government to improve.

To illustrate the state of education governance in cities with school choice, a good place to start is the charter sector. Charter schools raise important governance questions because of their growing numbers and because, by design, they operate independently from traditional school districts.[20] **Figure 7** shows a sample of 35 cities with large charter sectors as of the 2011–2012 school year. Charter enrollment varies widely across the cities. Twelve cities in the sample have charter school market shares above 20 percent. In three cities—Detroit, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C.—charters enroll more than a third of all public school students. New Orleans is the only city where the majority of students attend charter schools.[21] However, even cities at the bottom of the list—San Antonio and Indianapolis, for example—have relatively large charter school enrollments, especially when compared to the national charter market share of 3.6 percent.[22]

20. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Get the Facts, accessed February 14, 2014.

21. New Orleans charter school enrollment has likely increased since 2012; by the start of the 2014-2015 school year, 100 percent of the schools in New Orleans' Recovery School District will be charter schools. See Danielle Dreilinger, "Recovery School District Will Be Country's First All-Charter District in September 2014," *The Times-Picayune,* December 19, 2013.

22. Data are drawn from the 2011-2012 school year. In some cities, charter enrollments have since grown to exceed the numbers reported here and in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Charter Schools Are Widespread

City	District	Charter	Total students
New Orleans, LA	21.2	78.8	40,173 total students
Washington, DC	61.9	38.1	60,213
Detroit, MI	65.7	34.3	97,971
Cleveland, OH	71.7	28.3	56,329
Columbus, OH	72.4	27.6	89,748
Philadelphia, PA	74.5	25.5	183,190
Marietta, GA	76.1	23.9	50,935
Toledo, OH	77.0	23.0	40,511
St. Paul, MN	77.9	22.1	45,525
Milwaukee, WI	78.0	22.0	76,984
Oakland, CA	79.5	20.5	46,868
Minneapolis, MN	80.0	20.0	41,557
Newark, NJ	81.0	19.0	41,185
Los Angeles, CA	83.0	17.0	512,488
Baltimore, MD	84.0	16.0	76,006
Colorado Springs, CO	84.0	16.0	73,047
Kansas City, MO	84.2	15.8	63,072
Tucson, AZ	84.3	15.7	88,393
Cincinnati, OH	84.5	15.5	42,017
Mesa, AZ	85.2	14.8	82,873
Miami, FL	85.3	14.7	62,315
Denver, CO	86.7	13.3	75,764
Phoenix, AZ	86.7	13.3	254,341
Boston, MA	87.8	12.2	55,828
Chicago, IL	88.2	11.8	376,642
Baton Rouge, LA	88.3	11.7	36,449
Stockton, CA	88.4	11.6	59,559
Dallas, TX	88.8	11.2	186,354
Sacramento, CA	89.1	10.9	73,337
Chula Vista, CA	89.3	10.7	49,570
Houston, TX	90.4	9.6	495,683
Indianapolis, IN	90.8	9.2	125,301
San Antonio, TX	92.5	7.5	279,123
Memphis, TN	94.4	5.6	112,194
New York, NY	95.5	4.5	957,965

Public school enrollment by sector (percent of students)

■ District　■ Charter

Private school enrollment share (percent of students)

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2011–2012.

How Did We Pick the Cities?

We used a multi-stage sampling approach to pick cities with large charter markets. First, we used the location (latitude and longitude) of every school in the most recent release of the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data (2011–2012) to match it to a city using the U.S. Census Bureau's municipal boundaries. We matched schools to municipalities because we wanted to look at cities, not school districts, as our primary units of analysis. We took a city-centric approach because families in some places may choose from charter schools and multiple school districts, while in other places traditional school districts may serve more than one city or town.

After we matched schools to cities, we then generated total public enrollment counts by city (including traditional, magnet, and charter school enrollments) and selected the top 100 cities by enrollment to ensure we captured places with large K–12 public school systems.

Next, we selected 30 cities out of our 100 based on charter enrollment as a share of total public school enrollment. Finally, we handpicked five cities that research and policy have singled out for their public school choice systems and reform agendas: Houston, Indianapolis, Memphis, New York City, and San Antonio. For additional context, **Figure 7** includes private school enrollments drawn from the U.S. Department of Education's 2009–2010 Private School Universe Survey, but we did not use private school enrollments to pick the 35 cities.

When we look more closely at who is in charge of overseeing public education in these cities, we find that a diverse range of agencies—including state agencies, charter school authorizers, and nonprofit providers—operate alongside traditional public school districts. In **Figure 8,** each large rectangle represents the total public school enrollment in the city across all public schools (traditional and charter). Within each city, the blue rectangles represent enrollment overseen by different school districts, the orange rectangles represent enrollment overseen by independent charter school authorizers, and the green rectangles represent enrollment in charter schools authorized by traditional school districts.

For example, the rectangle for Washington, D.C., shows that there are two major oversight agencies: the large blue rectangle represents students in schools overseen by the District of Columbia Public Schools, and the large orange rectangle represents students in schools overseen by the Public Charter School Board.

Across the cities, there are 278 unique oversight agencies. In the typical city, there are nearly eight agencies responsible for oversight, making patchwork governance the norm, rather than the exception.

Two patterns deserve special attention. The first are cities that are broken up into many different school districts, each maintaining its own central office, superintendent, and school board. For example, Phoenix has 28 school districts responsible for overseeing and providing public education; Houston has 19 independent school districts. These multi-district systems pose special problems for charter operators, who might draw families from a dozen or more nearby school districts. If a charter operator in one of these cities wanted to coordinate with local school districts on enrollment timelines or collaborate to share data on feeder patterns, for example, they might have to negotiate separate agreements with each school district. Families in these cities who change residence may find themselves in a new district with, for better or worse, an entirely different set of schools and programs to choose from.

The second pattern has to do with charter oversight. Some cities have half a dozen or more charter school authorizers sponsoring schools. Students in Minneapolis attend schools overseen by 14 charter school authorizers—from the Audubon Center of the North Woods to the YMCA of Metropolitan Minneapolis. In Cleveland, schools are sponsored by the Cleveland Metropolitan School District and eight different charter school authorizers. In Detroit, 11 different agencies sponsor and oversee public schools. Under these arrangements, it is not always clear who is responsible for addressing the needs of those families who lack access to a high-quality school or neighborhoods that are most neglected.

Figure 8. Oversight of City Schools Involves Many Agencies
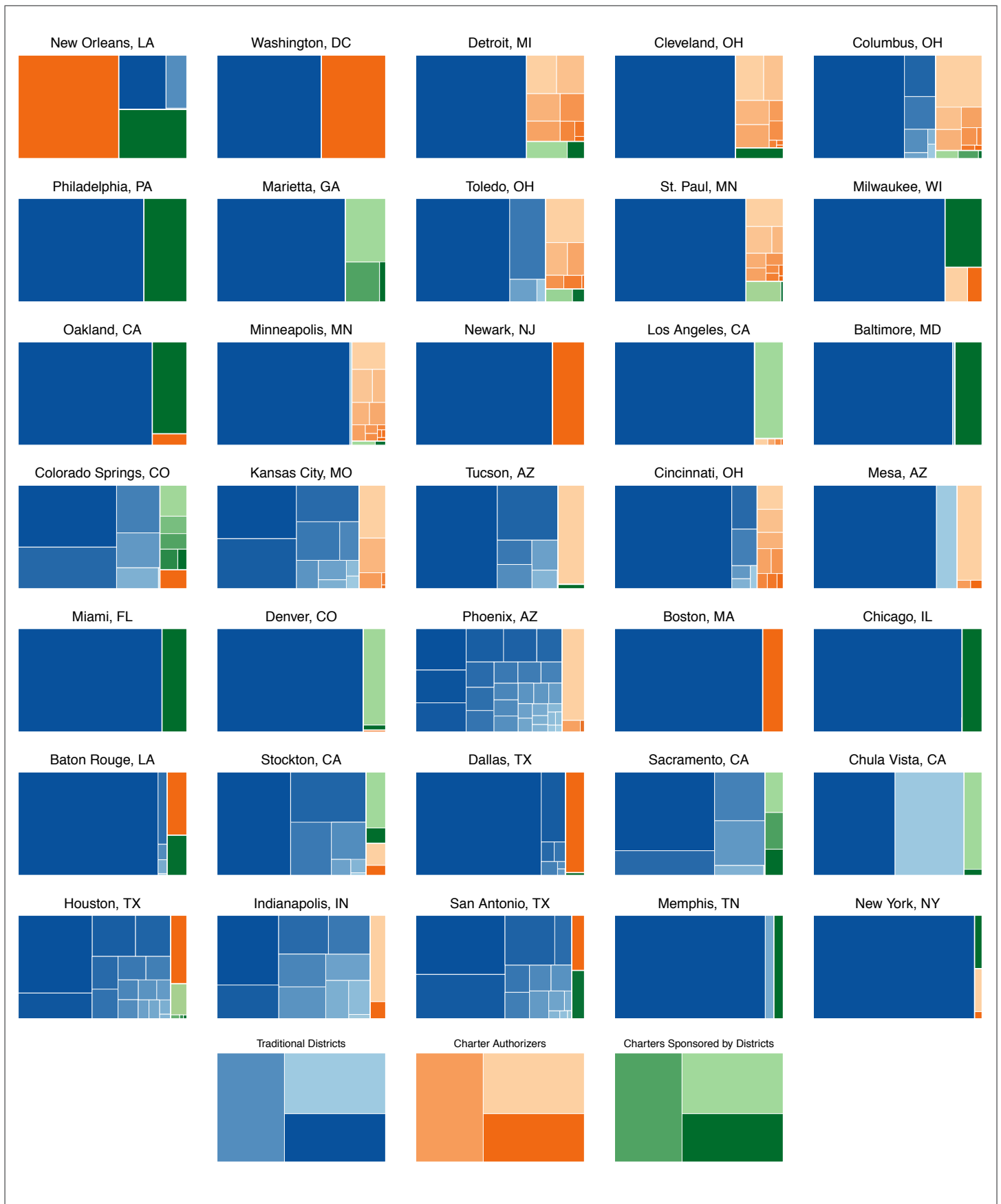
The landscape is even more complex when we consider who manages local school districts and charter school authorizers.[23] **Figure 9** shows that some districts are overseen by traditionally elected school boards, but others are overseen by mayors or states; some charter school authorizers are local school districts, but others are state education agencies, independent boards, higher education institutions, nonprofits, or municipal governments. In some places, such as Ohio, nonprofit charter authorizers may contract with for-profit organizations to manage the authorization process.

Urban education has never been free from conflict, but cities with complex governance arrangements like those in **Figure 8** face particular challenges when it comes to addressing citywide issues. By dispersing oversight authority across many different groups and putting those groups in competition for resources, it becomes much more difficult for city leaders to drive improvements in public education or address the challenges facing parents citywide.

Figure 9. Many Kinds of Actors Oversee City Schools
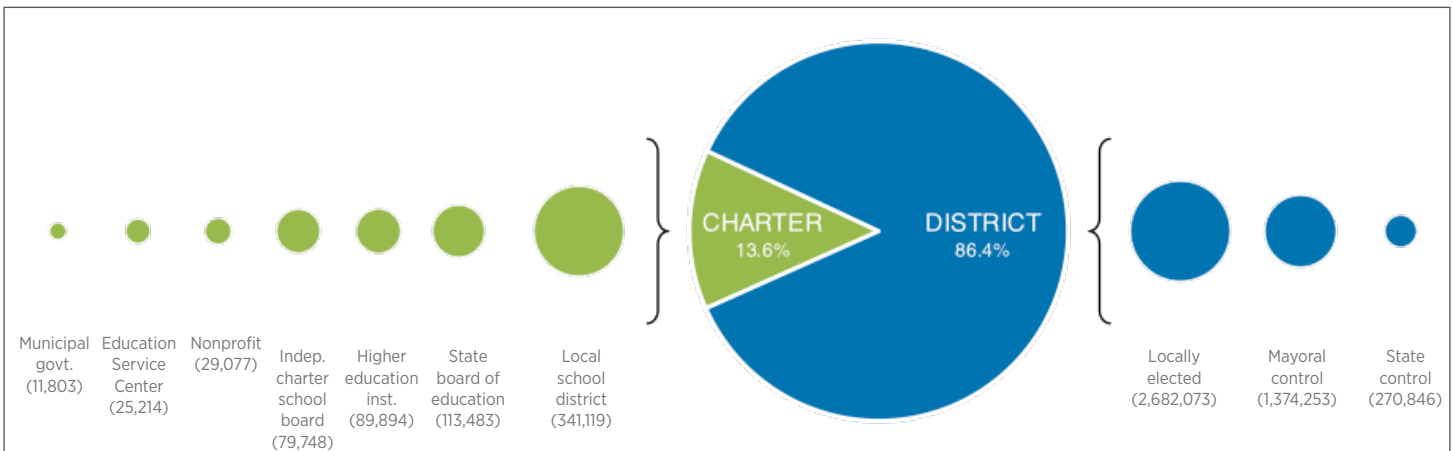
Note: The number of students enrolled under each governance structure is in parentheses.

23. The charts are sized based on total public school enrollment for each entity. This is preferable to number of schools because schools can vary considerably in size. For traditional local education agencies, we drew upon data from the National School Boards Association, "Selection of Local School Boards" (Washington, DC: NSBA, 2009). In some cases, appointment of school board members is divided among more than one entity (e.g., the mayor and the governor). In Detroit, the school board is selected via local elections but formal authority over district finances resides with an emergency manager appointed by the governor. In Baltimore, the mayor and governor share appointment power, though the state board of education must approve all selections.

Making School Choice Work

Many parents are taking advantage of choice, but finding a good fit means tracking down information on schools, traversing a complicated enrollment process, and finding transportation. In many cities, parents often do these things entirely on their own, with little assistance from the institutions that have ostensible control over public education. Even more troubling, parents too often find that there are few good schools available—even in cities where charter schools significantly outperform district schools. Parents with less education or whose children have special needs have an even harder time.

Choice has given urban parents a way to escape chronically poor-performing schools, but civic and education leaders have significant work to do to ensure that every child has equal access to an excellent education. Cities across the country are working to accomplish this daunting task. New cross-sector policies that can help make choice work better for families are emerging in cities like Denver, New Orleans, Cleveland, and Washington, D.C., including unified enrollment systems, comprehensive parent information systems, and common accountability frameworks.[24]

But planning, implementing, and improving these and other cross-sector policies is not only a question of designing a better system or framework. It is a matter of getting a fragmented mix of school districts, charter authorizers, and charter school operators who function largely independently to take collective responsibility for dealing with the issues that parents and children face citywide.

Addressing the challenges identified in this report will require action and vision from leaders who are more committed to improving outcomes for children than they are to particular institutional arrangements. State and local leaders with real authority and leverage must push, pull, and motivate various actors so that citywide:

- Every neighborhood has great public school options.
- Children have safe passage and free or affordable transportation to schools.
- Families have access to information on all public schools so they can make informed choices.
- Enrollment decisions are fair and transparent.
- Children and families with the most challenges have extra support and equitable access to good schools.
- Low-performing schools improve or are replaced with better options.

Our early experiences observing cities struggling with these issues suggest some approaches to drive actors toward these ends when no one has the sole authority, capacity, or credibility to manage the entire system.

Voluntary cooperation is the most informal approach to rallying the system, but it is also the most fragile. Mayors, advocacy groups, and community organizers can support voluntary cooperation by framing common problems and solutions in a way that resonates with a range of stakeholders. Mayors can use their bully pulpits to convene people to start identifying problems and to shame bad actors to

24. See CRPE, *Common School Performance Frameworks* and common enrollment brief series: *Coordinating Enrollment Across School Sectors: An Overview of Common Enrollment Systems, Stakeholder Engagement for Common Enrollment Systems,* and *Working Together to Manage Enrollment: Key Governance and Operations Decisions* (Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2014).

change their ways. They can also use their city's resources to address transportation and safety issues that interfere with a healthy, functioning school choice system.

For example, in Washington, D.C., an official in the mayor's office with experience in both the charter and district sectors was instrumental in getting the Public Charter School Board and District of Columbia Public Schools to come to an understanding about the need for a common enrollment system that would span both sectors. In Cleveland, district leaders came together with the mayor's office and local community leaders to form the Transformation Alliance to create better enrollment, accountability, transportation, and parent information systems across the city's charter and district schools.

But voluntary cooperation is not always easy or feasible. Efforts to create a unified enrollment system in Philadelphia, for example, stalled out when charter and district leaders could not reach agreement about who would manage the enrollment process. Community-based efforts in Detroit to pressure authorizers to close low-performing schools struggle because community leaders do not have authority or leverage over authorizers. Even in Washington, D.C., where there have been real strides in goodwill and problem-solving between the district and charter sectors, those efforts are dependent on personalities and, therefore, vulnerable to changes in leadership.

In addition to voluntary cooperation, leaders can consider using **financial or other resource incentives,** like local levy funds and facilities, to address system-wide problems. Leaders in Columbus, Ohio, for example, proposed giving local levy money to high-performing charter schools that agreed to locate in underserved neighborhoods (though voters defeated the proposal in 2013). District leaders in Cleveland offer levy funds to charter schools that choose to partner with the district, even if they are authorized by another agency. While such incentives offer the advantage of relying on voluntary action, someone—a lead agency or coalition of groups—must decide to offer the incentives and secure the required resources.

In some cases, stronger action will be needed. Many states could use their **authority to intervene** against low-quality operators to prevent irresponsible authorizing and to make choice systems more fair and efficient for families. The state-run Recovery School District in New Orleans, for example, used its authority to require charter schools in the city to participate in a unified enrollment system.

States could also change the way they sponsor and fund authorizers to emphasize quality over quantity. Michigan authorizers receive a percentage of revenue from each school they authorize, which creates a disincentive to close schools.

Other states fund authorizers at least in part from a regular line item in the state budget. There is no magic formula, but states need to take a look at the incentives authorizers operate under and make sure they make sense. Effective state action will require determination and attention to consequences. In Ohio, for example, the state legislature passed a law mandating the automatic closure of low-performing charter schools, but some for-profit operators have been able to avoid accountability by reopening schools under much of the same management and staff.[25]

Finally, in some cases, **formal governance changes** may be necessary to reduce the number of authorizers involved and take away some agencies' authority to open new schools, or to create specialized agencies or interagency agreements to oversee and administer citywide policies. In Ohio, after an unprecedented number of charter school failures, the state department of education launched an audit of charter authorizers' operations to address what role the state should play in determining "who has the authority and the power to supervise charter schools."[26] States might also consider creating new citywide commissions with the authority to coordinate services and close failing schools. These measures could apply to both charter authorizers and districts and offer a way to ensure that all families and neighborhoods have access to quality schools.

In the coming year, CRPE researchers will be studying how these and other approaches are playing out in urban school systems across the country: where they succeed, where they fail, and under what conditions they seem to be most effective. In the fall of 2014, we will release more detailed parent survey results across the eight cities we studied, including how parent experiences vary city by city. We will also release a book about a new governance model that aims to address some of the challenges we document in this report.

As we embark on this work we are convinced that policy debates need to move beyond ideological fights about whether urban school districts are improving on their own or whether charter schools are outperforming the status quo. It is notable that the only national comparison of school performance in urban areas today is the National Assessment of Educational Progress's Trial Urban District Assessment, which only tracks urban school district performance. We hope that we've demonstrated in this report that school districts are only one piece of urban school systems. Policymakers and the public need to know much more broadly whether, taken as a whole, the quality of schools citywide is improving and works for all families.

25. Policy Matters Ohio, *Avoiding Accountability: How Charter Operators Evade Ohio's Automatic Closure Law* (Columbus, OH: Policy Matters Ohio, 2013).
26. Amy Hansen, "State Auditor Launches Special Audit of a Handful of Charter Sponsors," *National Public Radio,* February 13, 2014.

Appendix A: Parent Survey Sample Characteristics

Descriptive Characteristics of Survey Respondents	
City	**Frequency**
Baltimore	500
Cleveland	500
Denver	500
Detroit	500
Indianapolis	500
New Orleans	500
Philadelphia	500
Washington, D.C.	500
TOTAL	**4,000**
Response	**Percent**
Gender, N=4,000	
Male	37.91
Female	62.09
Language Spoken at Home, N=4,000	
English	90.21
Spanish	4.63
Other	2.66
DK/NA/Refuse	2.51
Respondent Phone, N=4,000	
Landline	46.21
Mobile	53.79
Age, N=4,000	
18-24	4.44
25-34	27.15
35-44	35.26
45-54	22.15
55-64	7.75
65-74	2.38
75+	0.87

Hispanic, N=4,000	
Hispanic	12.9
Not Hispanic	85.28
DK/NA/Refuse	1.82
Race, N=3,574	
White	32.92
Black	58.46
Native American	1.12
Asian	1.66
Hispanic	0.28
Other	3.81
DK/NA/Refuse	1.77
Child with Special Needs, N=4,000	
Yes	17.04
No	82.14
DK/NA/Refuse	0.82
Grade of Child, N=4,000	
K	17.56
1st	10.14
2nd	8.3
3rd	6.47
4th	7.25
5th	7.02
6th	5.96
7th	6.06
8th	5.81
9th	7.51
10th	6.05
11th	5.71
12th	5.61
Education Level, N=4,000	
<8th	1.94
Some HS	6.49
HS	24.73
Some college	23.33
AA	9.74
BA	15.29
Some graduate school	2.74
Graduate or professional degree	12.98
DK/NA/Refuse	2.75
Household Income, N=4,000	
<$15K	11.03
$15-24K	12.42
$25-34K	13.29
$35-49K	12.62
$50-79K	14.32
$80-99K	8.55
>$100K	16.76
DK/NA/Refuse	11.01

Appendix B: Parent Survey Questions

This report draws upon on the following survey questions:

- Does your child have an identified special education need, an IEP, or a 504 plan?

- Does your child attend the public school that was assigned to you based on your address or did you choose a different school than the one assigned to you?

- Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I was able to get the information I needed to choose the best school for my child. Do you strongly <agree/disagree> or only somewhat?

- In addition to your current school, how many other public schools did you consider for your child?

- Here is a list of reasons that can make choosing a school difficult. Please tell me if any of the following made things difficult for you. You can just say yes or no for each.

  - Understanding which schools your child was eligible to attend

  - Difficult or confusing paperwork

  - Number of applications

  - Different application deadlines

  - Available schools weren't a good fit for my child

  - Finding transportation for my child to get to and from school

- Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: My child is enrolled in the school that was my first or second choice. Do you strongly <agree/disagree> or only somewhat?

- If your child couldn't attend his or her current school, is there another public school currently available to you that you'd be just as happy to send him or her to?

- Thinking about the school your child currently attends, would you say you are satisfied or dissatisfied with the quality of education they are receiving? Is that very <satisfied/dissatisfied> or only somewhat?

- What's the highest level of education you've fully completed?