

December 2014

Making School Choice Work Series

How Parents Experience Public School Choice

By Ashley Jochim, Michael DeArmond, Betheny Gross, and Robin Lake

CRPE
REINVENTING
PUBLIC EDUCATION

About This Report

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report would not have been possible without the cooperation of the many public school parents who took time to answer our survey. We also benefited from the expertise of colleagues at the Center on Reinventing Public Education, including research support provided by Patrick Denice and Thiago Marques, and thoughtful comments from Paul Hill and Christine Campbell. We are grateful for the expertise and insights provided by our reviewers, including Laura Hamilton, Jeffrey Henig, and Paul Teske. Finally, we would like to thank the Laura and John Arnold Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation for supporting this work. The findings and conclusions presented here are ours alone and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the foundations.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ashley Jochim is a Research Analyst at CRPE. Her research primarily focuses on how to provide public oversight for education. Dr. Jochim is a coauthor (with Michael DeArmond and Robin Lake) of a recent report, *Making School Choice Work*, which considers how cities can work toward solutions that address the challenges facing families in urban school systems today. She is a coauthor (with CRPE founder Paul Hill) of an upcoming book that suggests who governs public education is much less important than what powers they have. Her work can be found in the *Policy Studies Journal*, *Politics and Governance*, and *Political Research Quarterly*, as well as numerous edited volumes, including the *Handbook of School Choice* and the *Oxford Handbook of American Bureaucracy*. In 2012, she was selected as one of a dozen emerging education policy scholars interested in narrowing the gap between research and policy. Prior to working at CRPE, she was a graduate fellow at the Center for American Politics and Public Policy at the University of Washington as well as a research analyst at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Civil Rights. Dr. Jochim holds a BA in Political Science and Psychology and an MA and PhD in Political Science, all from the University of Washington.

Michael DeArmond is a Senior Research Analyst at CRPE. His research focuses on human resource management reforms, teacher policy, and policy implementation. Dr. DeArmond's published work includes studies of teacher shortages, teacher compensation, the reform of district human resource departments, and school-based hiring initiatives in traditional public schools and charter schools. He holds a PhD in educational leadership and policy studies and an MPA in social policy and education, both from the University of Washington, and a BA in history from Brown University. Prior to working as a researcher he was a middle school history teacher.

Betheny Gross is a Senior Research Analyst and the Research Director at CRPE. She coordinates CRPE's quantitative research initiatives, including analysis of portfolio districts, charter schools, and emerging teacher evaluation policies. Dr. Gross has examined evidence and outcomes of district reform across the country, including Chicago, New York, New Orleans, Denver, and Broward County (Florida), and has advised and consulted with district leaders to formulate strategy and implementation. Dr. Gross is coauthor of *Strife and Progress: Portfolio Strategies for Managing Urban Schools* (Brookings 2013) and the author of numerous research reports and articles. Her work has been published in several journals, including *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *American Education Research Journal*, *Journal of Education Finance*, and *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*.

Robin Lake is Director of CRPE, and Affiliate Faculty, School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, at the University of Washington Bothell. She is internationally recognized for her research and analysis of U.S. public school system reforms, including charter schools and charter management organizations; innovation and scale; portfolio school districts; school turnaround efforts; and performance-based accountability systems. Lake has authored numerous studies and provided expert testimony and technical assistance on charter schools and urban reform. She is the editor of *Unique Schools Serving Unique Students: Charter Schools and Children with Special Needs* (CRPE 2010) and editor of the annual report, *Hopes, Fears, & Reality: A Balanced Look at American Charter Schools*. She coauthored, with Paul Hill, *Charter Schools and Accountability in Public Education* (Brookings 2002). Lake serves as a board member or advisor to various organizations, including the Journal of School Choice, the National Center on Special Education in Charter Schools, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, and the National Charter School Resource Center. Lake holds an MPA in Education and Urban Policy and a BA in International Studies, both from the University of Washington.

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

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Introduction.....	4
Part 1: City Selection, Survey Methodology, and Sample Characteristics	5
Part 2: How Parents Experience Public School Choice	9
Part 3: How Parents' Experiences Vary Across Different Contexts	25
Conclusion	30
Technical Appendix A	31
Technical Appendix B	33
Technical Appendix C.....	34

Executive Summary

A growing number of cities now provide a range of public school options for families to choose from. Choosing a school can be one of the most stressful decisions parents make on behalf of their child. For all families, but for some more than others, getting access to the right public school will determine their child's future success. How are parents faring in cities where choice is widely available?

This report, the second in CRPE's Making School Choice Work series, answers this question by examining how parents' experiences with school choice vary across eight "high-choice" cities: Baltimore, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Indianapolis, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C.¹ In each city, we surveyed 500 public school parents and guardians (4,000 total) and collected data on the systems that shape how they navigate school choice, including the availability of information, the process of enrolling, and transportation options.²

Our findings suggest parents are taking advantage of the chance to choose a non-neighborhood-based public school option for their child, but there's more work to be done to ensure choice works for all families. School and civic leaders have the opportunity to make school choice more equitable and meaningful by addressing parents' desire for more high-quality school options and eliminating barriers that make choosing a school difficult.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Parents are taking advantage of choice, but they want more good options.
- Parents experience school choice differently in different cities.

- Parents with less education, minority parents, and parents of special-needs children are more likely to report challenges navigating choice.
- Cities have made uneven investments in the systems that support parent choice.
- All cities have work to do to ensure choice works for all families.

Parents are taking advantage of choice, but they want more good options. When parents get the opportunity to choose among district and charter schools, they take advantage of it. But they wish there were better options.

Across the cities, nearly half of parents reported having no other good option available to them beyond their current school, and a third or more of parents reported struggling to find a school that was a good fit for their child. Parents experience these challenges even in cities like Detroit and New Orleans where public school choice is widely available.

Parents experience school choice differently in different cities. Differences across the cities suggest parents' perceived challenges and opportunities with choice vary depending on where they live.

In Denver, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C., parents were more likely than parents in the other cities to say their school

1. In July 2014, CRPE released Making School Choice Work, which aimed to start a conversation among those working in advocacy, the civic sector, charter schools, and traditional public school districts about how to create a choice system that works for all families. Find the report here: <http://www.crpe.org/publications/making-school-choice-work>

2. In the interest of being succinct, throughout this report we will refer to the respondents collectively as "parents."

systems were getting better. In Philadelphia, only 11 percent of parents reported having a positive outlook about the public education system, compared to 65 percent in D.C.

However, a generally positive outlook does not necessarily mean that families are satisfied with their public school options. Denver parents were most likely to report having another good public school option available to them, but parents in Philadelphia, New Orleans, and D.C. reported the most challenge finding a school that provided a good fit for their child.

In D.C. and New Orleans, parents were also more likely than parents in other cities to report prioritizing academic quality over safety and location: 80 percent of parents in D.C. and 79 percent of parents in New Orleans reported prioritizing academics over safety and location, compared to just 64 percent in Detroit and 69 percent in Cleveland. While these results cannot tell us whether some parents value academics less, it seems likely that safety and location are more important when some of the available schools are unsafe or when few good schools are available near the home—issues that point to the impossible trade-offs that some parents face when choosing a school.

In each city, parents struggle with different aspects of the choice process. For example, Denver parents were less likely to report struggling to get the information they needed to choose but were more likely to report struggling to find transportation options. In Detroit, parents were less likely to report struggling with the enrollment process but more likely to report difficulty understanding which schools their child was eligible to attend.

Parents with less education, minority parents, and parents of special-needs children are more likely to report challenges navigating choice. Within cities, families' experiences with choice vary by socioeconomic status, race, and whether the child has special education needs. In Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Denver, parents with a high school diploma or less were much less likely to act on school choice than parents with higher levels of education. Yet, in Detroit, Cleveland, and Indianapolis, parents with a high school diploma or less chose a non-neighborhood-based public school at rates similar to parents with a bachelor's degree or more. Parents with less education were also much more likely to make difficult trade-offs in choosing a school. In every city, parents with a high school diploma or less were significantly less likely than parents with a bachelor's degree or more to report academics as a priority and more likely to cite safety and location as salient concerns.

In D.C. and New Orleans, black and Hispanic parents were much less likely to report a positive outlook on the school system compared to white parents. In Cleveland and Detroit, black and Hispanic parents were significantly less likely than

white parents to report trusting the school system to make sure that all neighborhoods have great schools.

Parents of children with special needs were significantly more likely to report trouble finding a school that fits. In Baltimore, parents whose children qualified for special education services were 52 percent more likely to report this challenge compared to parents whose children did not qualify for special education services.

Cities have made uneven investments in the systems that support parent choice. Parents' experiences with choice are likely shaped by the systems and supports put in place by policymakers, including access to information about schools, the enrollment process, and transportation options.

Denver, D.C., and New Orleans have made the most progress in investing in these systems. However, we saw little consistent evidence linking specific investments with positive outcomes, which may simply be a reflection of the newness of the investment or may indicate the need for these cities to go further into developing these supports.

In Denver, parents who enrolled their child after implementation of the common (sometimes called “unified” or “universal”) enrollment system, which enables parents to apply to all charter and district schools via a single application, were less likely to report struggling with enrollment processes. Yet, in New Orleans, parents were more likely to report problems after the introduction of common enrollment.

In cities with the most comprehensive information systems, which provide information on school performance, curriculum, and the enrollment process, parents were no more likely to report having the information they need to make a choice than in cities with less developed information systems. This likely means that all of these cities need to go much further to develop meaningful ways to help families get the information that is useful to their school search. Parents indicated in our survey that they are more likely to visit schools than read about test scores in the parent guide to make their decisions. Cities may need to find more systematic ways to help parents assess school culture and other areas they care about.

Our results provide some reason to believe that transportation investments are paying off in certain high-choice cities. In New Orleans, the only city where most charter schools are required to provide transportation, just 19 percent of parents reported difficulty with finding transportation for their child, compared to 32 percent in Cleveland where transportation is not provided.

When it comes to investing in systems that support parent choice, too many actors may create complications. At the time of our survey, the cities with the greatest number of agencies responsible for public oversight—including districts

and charter school authorizers—were the least likely to have invested in systems that support parent choice. Detroit and Cleveland were significantly less likely to have in place comprehensive parent information systems, streamlined enrollment systems, and transportation options for children attending non-neighborhood-based public schools. At the same time, the cities where the district is the primary or sole charter authorizer—including Denver, Philadelphia, and Baltimore—supporting policies and parents’ experiences vary widely.

Our takeaway from these rough trends is consistent with a thesis we put forth in our previous report, *Making School Choice Work*: it is more difficult to address issues of quality, equity, and efficiency in a choice system when there are multiple agencies responsible for public oversight, many of which have a statewide focus and are not located in the city. Yet, it is also clear that concentrating authority into a single agency, usually a public school district, is not a sure path toward ensuring that parents’ concerns are addressed.

All cities have work to do to ensure choice works for all families. All of the cities—even those such as Denver, Washington, D.C., and New Orleans that have done the most to help families manage the choice process—have much work left to do. No city looks good on all, or even most, measures. In every city, certain types of families have a harder time confidently exercising choice than other families.

While no solution is likely to work equally well in all city contexts, civic leaders in these and other cities can take some concrete lessons from our results:

- Aggressively attend to the supply of high-quality schools. The single biggest constraint parents face in choosing a school is the lack of high-quality options available to them. Cities need a viable plan for improving existing schools while attracting a diverse array of new high-quality school providers.
- Recognize that different families have different needs. Cities should take a close look at which parents are struggling the most to navigate their choices and develop new, customized solutions for them. The groups that need additional support vary from city to city, and much depends on contextual factors such as the availability of high-quality schools in different neighborhoods.
- Guarantee free and safe passage to schools. For many families, including those that are well resourced, the lack of transportation severely constrains the options that are available to them. If city leaders want all families to be able to benefit from choice, they must ensure that parents choosing non-neighborhood-based schools have the same transportation options as those who choose neighborhood schools.
- Invest much more heavily in information systems. Parents in high-choice cities are seeking information on their options, but sorting through it all can be overwhelming. Cities need to develop rich information resources to help parents choose a school. A booklet listing programs and test scores is a good start, but cities should do much more to support informed choice by leveraging trusted community institutions and school staff to provide the personalized and interactive sources of information parents crave.

In every city, government, nonprofit agencies, and civic leaders have a role to play in supporting a high-functioning public school choice environment. For school choice to be fully successful, cities need to expand the supply of high-quality schools and provide better support for parents as they navigate their options.

Introduction

Joe Jiminez lives in Denver and his daughter is about to enter middle school.³ He knew the district offered many public school options but when he looked at what was available in his neighborhood, none seemed very good. “I feel like if you don’t live in a good area, you don’t have as many choices.” So he began to look a bit farther afield, despite the fact that doing so would make it difficult to get his daughter to and from school each day.

To apply for enrollment, Joe ranked his top three choices in a single application provided by the district. All of the schools he applied for were high performing, based on the district’s school performance framework. Yet, when school system officials ran the lottery in the spring, he discovered his daughter didn’t get into any of her options, leaving her stuck in her low-performing neighborhood school. “I think the [enrollment] process was pretty self-explanatory. It was the end result that was pretty disappointing...the good schools all have waiting lists.” The result left Joe feeling confused and angry: his family had invested considerable effort navigating their city’s system of public school choice, but came away feeling no better off because of it.

Joe is not alone in his frustration. In American cities today, many parents have welcomed the opportunity to choose a school other than the one assigned to them based on their neighborhood. But doing so requires considerable effort, and the intense competition over the highest-quality schools means that some families end up no better off, no matter how hard they try.

This report presents the views of 4,000 public school parents in eight cities where choice is prevalent: Baltimore, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Indianapolis, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. The results show that parents’ opportunities and challenges under school choice vary considerably from city to city. Despite some bright spots, choice is a work in progress in all of the cities.

This report has three parts. In Part 1, we describe our approach to studying parents’ experiences in high-choice cities today, including why we selected the eight cities we studied, how their family populations differ, and how we conducted our survey. In Part 2, we describe the results of the survey, including what we learned about who chooses, how they view their options, and what barriers they encounter. In Part 3, we consider how the cities in our study have invested in systems that support parent choice and public oversight, and what these arrangements imply for families’ experiences with school choice.

3. In the spring of 2014, CRPE researchers conducted interviews with parents in Denver. This story is one of many we heard. The interviewee’s name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

Part 1: City Selection, Survey Methodology, and Sample Characteristics

The eight cities covered in this report do not represent an “average” or “typical” American city. Because we were interested in how parents experience public school choice, we selected cities where families have many opportunities to choose among non-neighborhood-based schools. In every case, our focus is on parents who live in the city, not just those served by the largest or most well-known school district.

The expansion of choice has done more than provide families with new public school options; it has also brought in new players who are responsible for public oversight. We wanted our sample to also capture the range of oversight structures that are present in cities with a significant amount of choice. Accordingly, in some of the cities in our sample, a public school district is responsible for the bulk of the charter authorizing. But in other cities, several agencies play roles in public oversight, including institutions of higher education and nonprofits. In theory, all of these oversight agencies have a role in managing the quality of schools available to families, but they can also be important players when it comes to policies that address parents’ information, enrollment, and transportation needs.

Table 1 summarizes choice enrollment and oversight agencies for each city. We measured choice enrollment using each

city’s estimated charter school enrollment in 2011–12, the most recent year of data available from the National Center on Education Statistics.⁴ These data are somewhat dated, but they nevertheless show that significant shares of students attend charter schools in each of the cities. The chart also shows whether parents can choose schools within their district or in other, nearby districts. The cities all offer parents choices, but are different in important ways. In Washington, D.C., for example, few parents attend the school assigned to them based on their residence.⁵ But in other cities, including Indianapolis and Denver, attending the neighborhood school remains the norm. Indeed, New Orleans is the only city in the survey where students do not have a default school—everyone engages in the same choice process. In the other seven cities, parents are assigned a neighborhood school, which they then must opt out of if they want to choose a different school.

4. The Common Core of Data provides the only national look at public school enrollments in the United States. We calculated charter school enrollments using geo-coding for each school and Census-based shape files for each city. In all of the cities, reported enrollment is significantly lower than current enrollment given the time lag reflected in the available data.

5. According to the District of Columbia Public Schools, half of the district’s enrollment is driven by out-of-boundary placements. In the case of New Orleans, all city schools are open enrollment and parents must choose.

Table 1. Choice Policies in the Eight Survey Cities

CITY	% CHARTER ENROLLMENT	INTRA-DISTRICT CHOICE AVAILABLE	INTER-DISTRICT CHOICE AVAILABLE	CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS
Baltimore	13.4%	Yes, open enrollment and selective admissions	No	Baltimore City Public Schools
Cleveland	24.1%	Yes, open enrollment and selective admissions	Yes	Cleveland Metro School District Educational Service Center of Lake Erie West Buckeye Community Hope Foundation Ohio Council of Community Schools St. Aloysius Orphanage Ashe Culture Center Ohio Department of Education Richland Academy Portage County Educational Service Center
Denver	11.6%	Yes, open enrollment and selective admissions	Yes	Colorado Charter School Institute Denver Public Schools
Detroit	33.4%	Yes, open enrollment and selective admissions	Yes	Detroit City School District Central Michigan University Saginaw Valley State University Eastern Michigan University Oakland University Ferris State University Lake Superior State University Grand Valley State University Bay Mills Community College
Indianapolis	8.0%	Yes, open enrollment and selective admissions	Yes	Indianapolis Mayor's Office Ball State University Indiana Charter School Board
New Orleans	55.2%	Yes, open enrollment and selective admissions	No	Board of Elementary and Secondary Education Orleans Parish School Board
Philadelphia	20.6%	Yes, open enrollment and selective admissions	Yes	Philadelphia City School District
Washington, D.C.	30.7%	Yes, open enrollment and selective admissions	No	D.C. Public Charter School Board

Source: Charter enrollment drawn from Common Core of Data, 2011-2012, where the city is the unit of analysis. Data on authorizers were drawn from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2012.

To learn more about how families experience choice in the eight cities, we randomly selected 500 public school parents in each city (4,000 in total) to participate in a survey in March 2014.⁶ In the interest of being succinct, we will refer to the respondents collectively as “parents” in the remainder of this report, although respondents included parents and guardians. To qualify for participation, respondents had to live in one of the eight selected cities and have a child currently enrolled in a K-12 public school.⁷ We administered the survey using a combination of landline and cell phone numbers. Spanish language translation was available in all cities. The verbatim survey items used in this report are available in Technical Appendix A as well as in the notes field of every figure.

Overall, our survey respondents were fairly representative of their city’s overall population: with a few exceptions, sample demographics were within 3 to 5 percent of Census estimates of population characteristics (see Technical Appendix B for a comparison of parent characteristics and Census-based estimates of population characteristics).

As one might expect, parent characteristics varied across the cities. As Figure 1 shows, parents who answered the survey in D.C. and Denver generally had higher levels of education than the parents who answered the survey in Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Detroit.⁸ Throughout the report, we use parent education level to represent family socioeconomic status.⁹

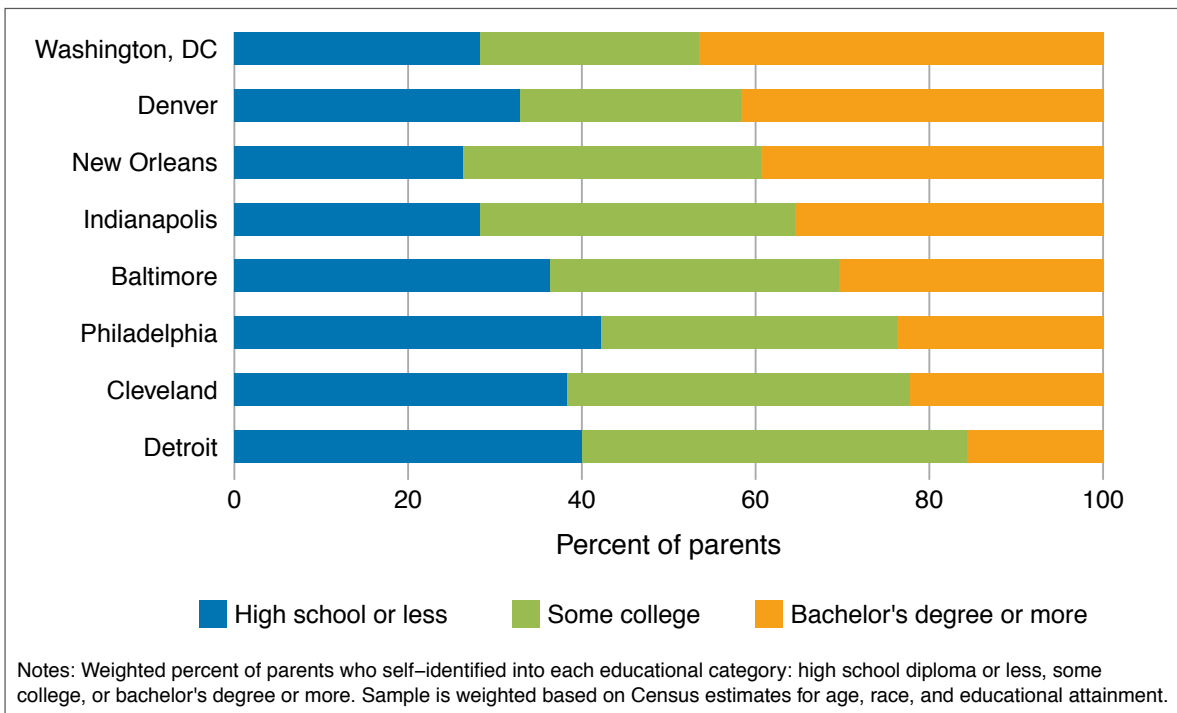
6. Random Digit Dialing (RDD) is the gold standard in survey research for obtaining representative samples. We pilot-tested the survey on a small scale prior to administration (N=19).

7. We chose to focus on public school parents because transportation, information, and enrollment vary markedly in the private sector, and government has limited leverage over affecting change in such systems.

8. We weight the results here to bring the sample’s characteristics more in line with each city’s Census-based demographics characteristics.

9. We chose to use education level instead of household income because income status is missing in upwards of 10 percent of cases.

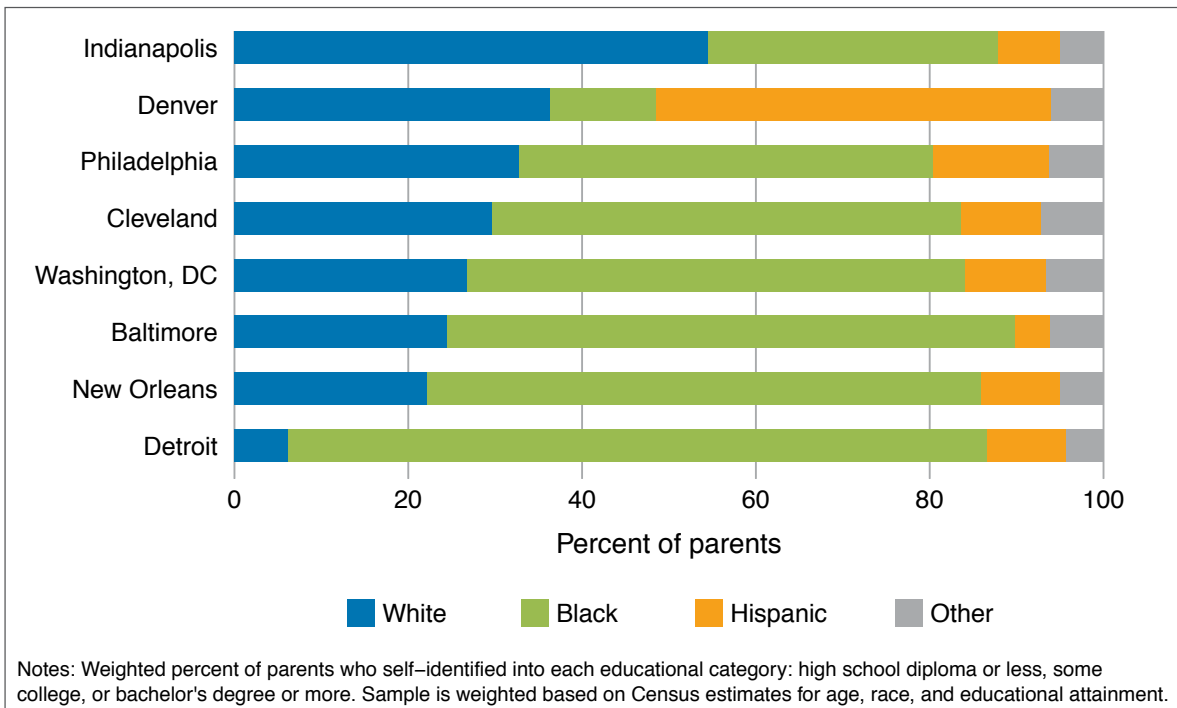
Figure 1. Education Level of Sample Parents Varies



The racial and ethnic characteristics of the parents across the cities also varied. For example, the majority of parents who answered the survey in Detroit were black (80 percent) while

in Denver only 12 percent of the parents were black (Figure 2). Overall, however, families of color made up a majority of the survey respondents in every city, except for Indianapolis.

Figure 2. Race and Ethnicity of Sample Parents Varies



Prior research has found that less advantaged parents are more likely than more advantaged parents to encounter barriers to choice and have fewer resources at their disposal.¹⁰ Accordingly, it is important to try to take into account differences between the parent populations in the eight cities when we interpret the results, otherwise we might risk attributing favorable results to a city's choice system when they actually reflect the relative advantage of its parent population. To account for some of the differences in each city's parent populations when we present survey results in Part 2 of this report, we use multivariate analysis techniques that statistically control for the different populations in each city. In most cases, the results presented

should be interpreted as reflecting what parents say about choice in each city *once we account for differences in each city's parent populations*. In a few cases, however, we do present some unadjusted results because the descriptive value of a question outweighs concerns about differences in parents across city contexts (for example, results about the time children spend getting to and from school).¹¹ All figures are annotated to indicate whether they use adjusted or unadjusted results. To see a comparison between the two approaches, see Technical Appendix A, which shows weighted and adjusted results side by side for each survey item.

10. See, for example, Bruce Fuller and Richard F. Elmore, with Gary Orfield, eds., *Who Chooses? Who Loses?: Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996); Edward B. Fiske and Helen F. Ladd, *When Schools Compete: A Cautionary Tale* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2000).

11. Descriptive statistics are weighted based on Census estimates for race, age, and educational attainment to be representative of the city population. Multivariate models include these variables as covariates and thus are based on the unweighted data.

Part 2: How Parents Experience Public School Choice

In this section, we look at what the survey tells us about how parents experience school choice. The results show that a majority of parents are opting into non-neighborhood-based public schools and are largely satisfied with the quality of education their children receive. Yet when these same parents look beyond their current schools, many struggle to identify another good option. Differences across the cities suggests that some places have made much more progress toward ensuring that school choice is accessible to all families, but parents in all cities still face challenges when it comes to exercising choice.

We now look at who is choosing, how they view their options and the school system in their city, what they are looking for in a school, and what they say gets in the way of choosing the best school for their child.

WHO IS CHOOSING?

In every city but Indianapolis, half or more of parents reported exercising school choice. But in many places (though not all), less advantaged families are more likely to stay in their neighborhood school.

Half or More of Parents Exercise Choice

In five of the eight cities, half or more of parents reported choosing a school that is not based on where they live

(Figure 3). In Washington, D.C., for example, nearly two-thirds of parents reported enrolling their child in a non-neighborhood-based public school. In New Orleans, where the vast majority of public schools are charter schools, 87 percent of parents reported choosing a non-neighborhood-based public school. Indianapolis is the only city we surveyed where less than half (35 percent) of parents reported choosing a non-neighborhood-based school for their child. This is likely driven by the fact that the city of Indianapolis incorporates all of Marion County as part of a city-county government. School districts in Marion County may offer fewer non-neighborhood-based and charter school options than are available within the urban core and Indianapolis Public Schools.

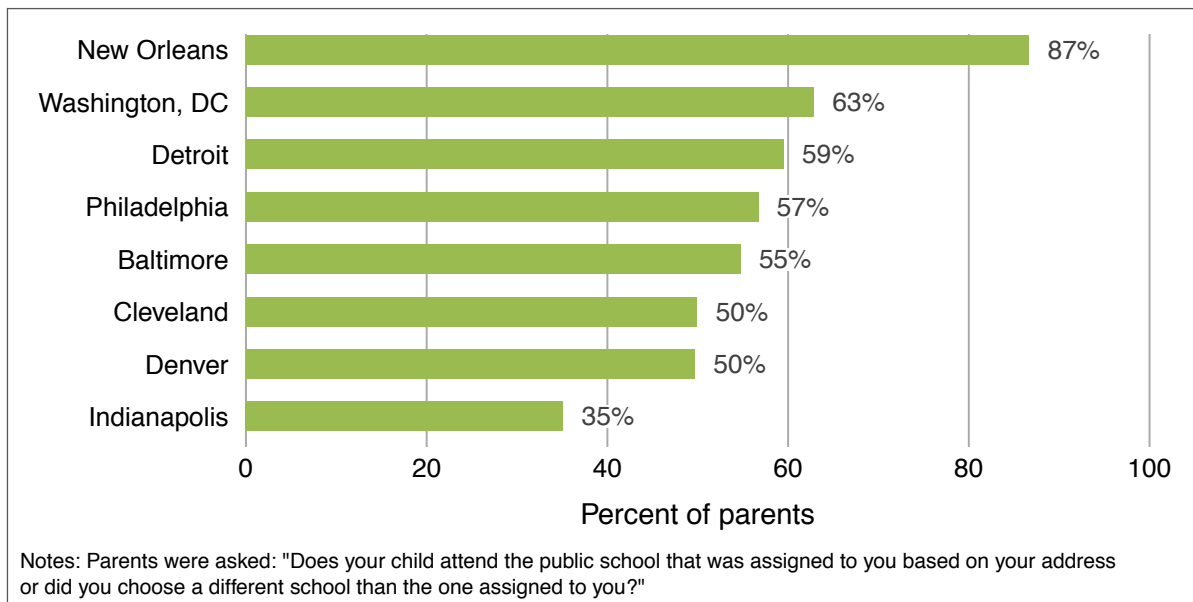
What does it mean to “choose a school?”

Under traditional neighborhood-based public school systems, the main way parents choose a school is by buying a home in a particular neighborhood. This puts low-income parents at a distinct disadvantage since homes located in neighborhoods with higher-performing schools tend to cost more.¹² In cities where other school options are available, including charter schools and magnet schools, some parents may continue to choose neighborhood-based public schools, or they may pick schools that are not tied to their residential choices. Throughout this report, we avoid calling parents who pick non-neighborhood-based schools “choosers” because that term leaves the impression that families in neighborhood schools do not “choose” their schools via residential choice, when in fact they may.

A long-standing concern about school choice is that less advantaged families confront more barriers to choice and, as a result, will not benefit from it.¹³ Figure 4 shows that this concern has some validity: parents with higher levels of education (in this case, a bachelor’s degree or more) are more likely to report choosing a non-neighborhood-based

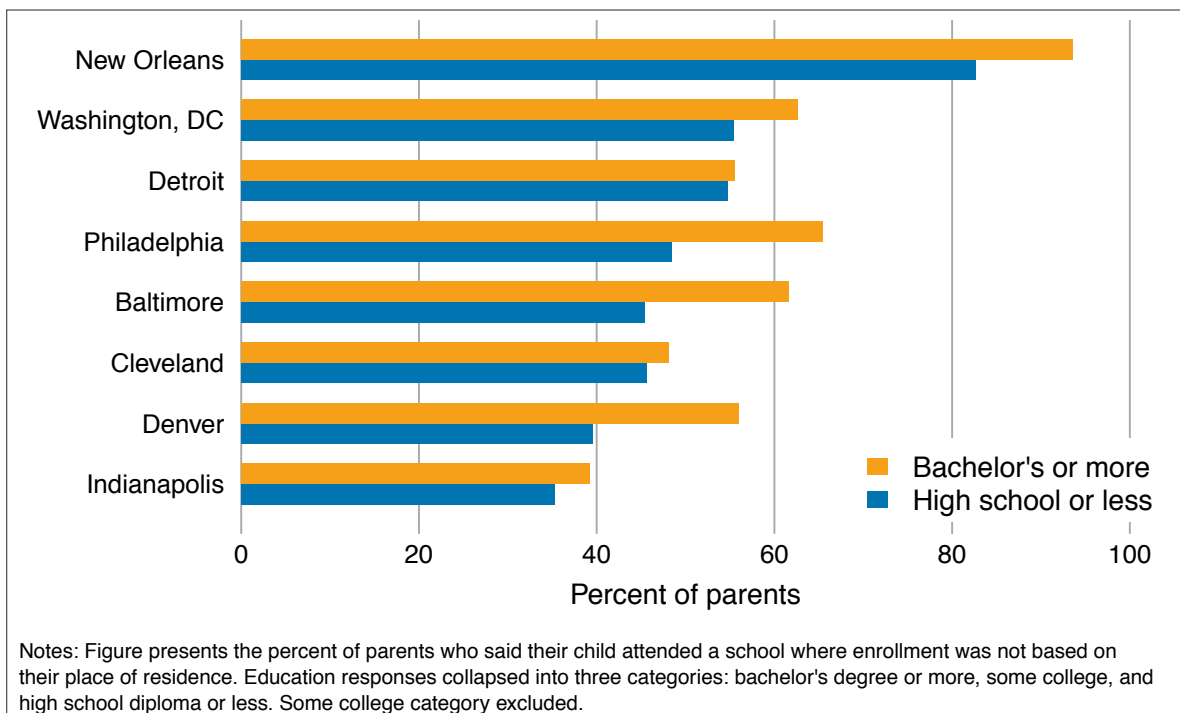
public school in most of the cities. Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Denver have the largest gaps between parents with a college degree and parents with a high school diploma or less (around 17 percent). The gaps in Detroit, Indianapolis, and Cleveland are much smaller.

Figure 3. A Majority of Parents Choose a Non-Neighborhood-Based Public School



12. See Phuong Nguyen-Hoang and John Yinger, “The Capitalization of School Quality Into House Values: A Review,” *Journal of Housing Economics* 20, no. 1 (2011): 30-48; Thomas A. Downes and Jeffrey E. Zabel, “The Impact of School Characteristics on House Prices: Chicago, 1987-1991,” *Journal of Urban Economics* 52, no. 1 (2002): 1-25.

13. See, for example, Fuller and Elmore, *Who Chooses? Who Loses?*

Figure 4. Educated Parents Are More Likely to Choose a Non-Neighborhood-Based Public School

HOW DO PARENTS VIEW THEIR OPTIONS AND THE SYSTEM?

Proponents of school choice argue that school choice expands parents' opportunities in the public school system by broadening the number of options available to them, increasing the likelihood of finding a school that fits, improving the quality of existing schools, and making schools more responsive to parents' concerns.¹⁴ Getting at these questions through a survey is difficult because parents are unlikely to report dissatisfaction with their current school; prior research suggests that parents overwhelmingly report being satisfied with their current school (upwards of 80 percent in many cases).¹⁵ To get around these challenges, we asked parents about how they perceive both the quality of education their child currently receives and the quality of the other options they have available through public school choice.

Parents Are Satisfied With Their Child's Current School

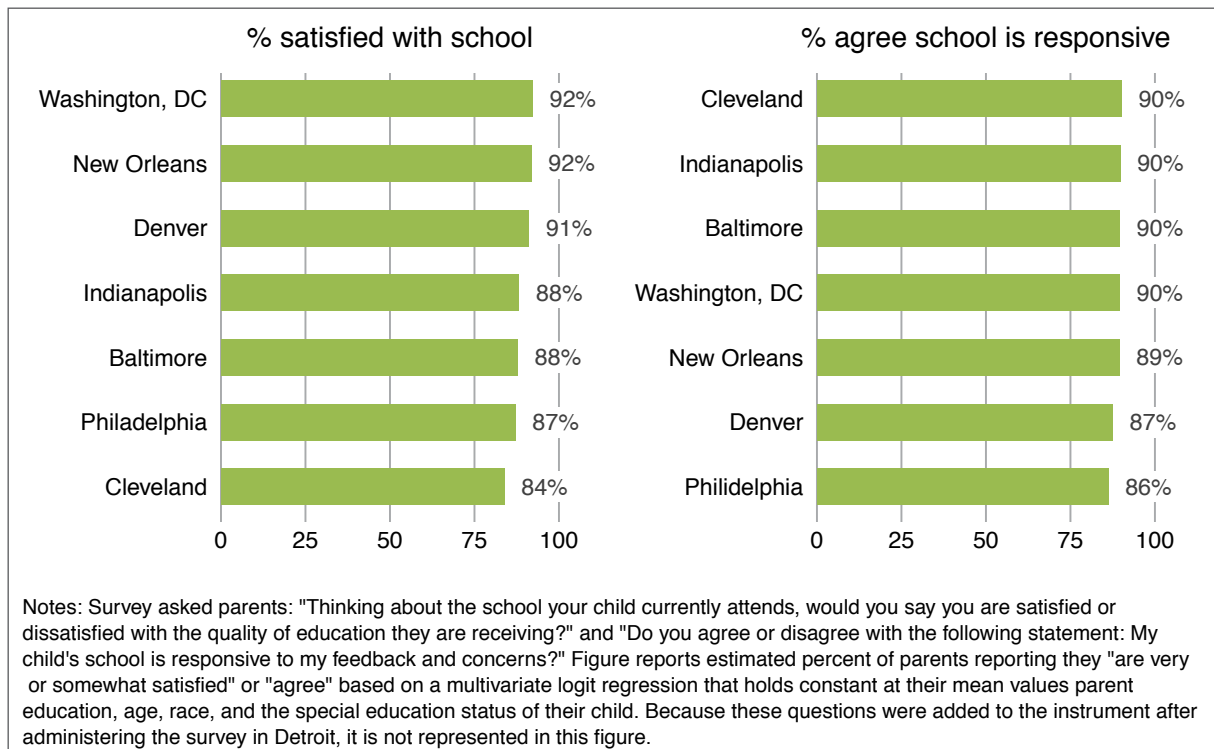
In large majority, parents reported satisfaction with the quality of education their child receives at school and that their school is responsive to their concerns (Figure 5).¹⁶ In general, we found no statistically significant difference in the satisfaction level or perceptions of responsiveness of parents whose children attend neighborhood schools versus those in non-neighborhood schools—with one exception. Philadelphians in non-neighborhood-based schools were significantly more likely (93 percent versus 76 percent, a gap of 17 percent) to report being satisfied with their school compared to parents whose children attended neighborhood-based schools.

14. For example, see John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1990).

15. See, for example, Trevor Tompson, Jennifer Benz, and Jennifer Agiesta, *Parents' Attitudes on the Quality of Education in the United States*, (Washington, DC: The Associate Press-NORC, Center for Public Affairs Research, 2013). For exploration why, see Martin R. West, *Why Do Americans Rate Their Local Public Schools So Favorably?* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2014).

16. We did not define quality for parents and it is likely that different parents think about different attributes of the school when they consider how satisfied they are with the quality of services.

Figure 5. Most Parents Are Satisfied With the Quality and Responsiveness of Schools

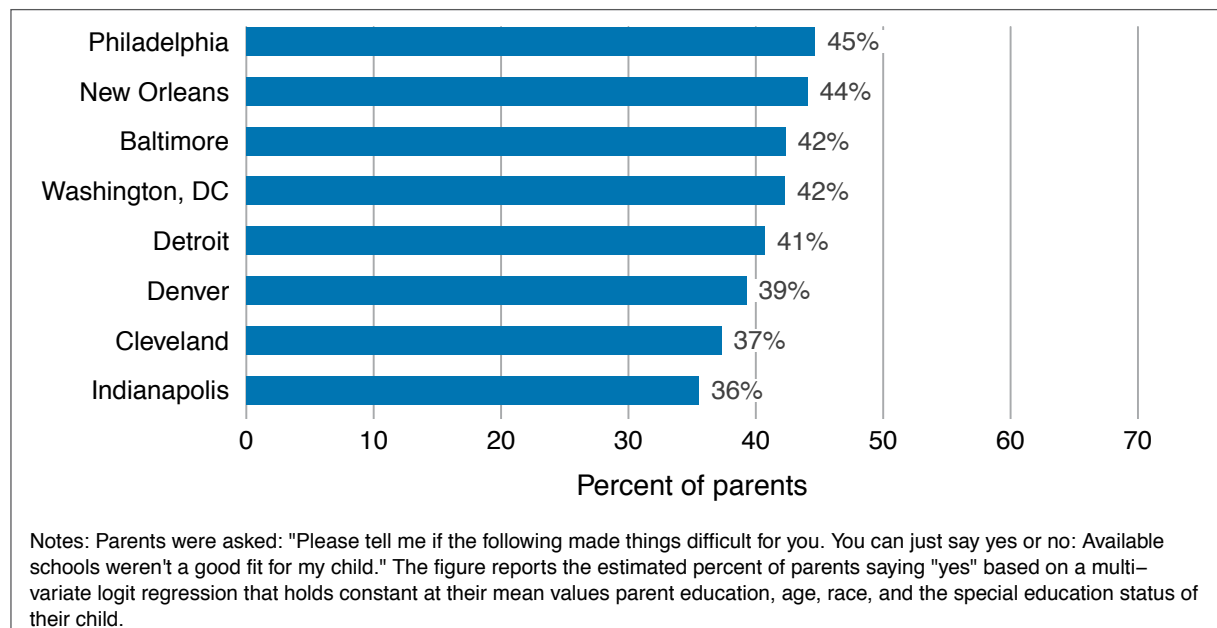


But Finding a Good Fit Is Challenging

While the results in Figure 5 suggest reason for optimism, when parents looked at the wider group of schools available to them, many reported trouble finding a good option. Figure 6 shows the percentage of parents who reported finding

a good fit among the schools that were available to them made choosing a school more difficult. The results range from 45 percent of parents in Philadelphia to 36 percent in Indianapolis.

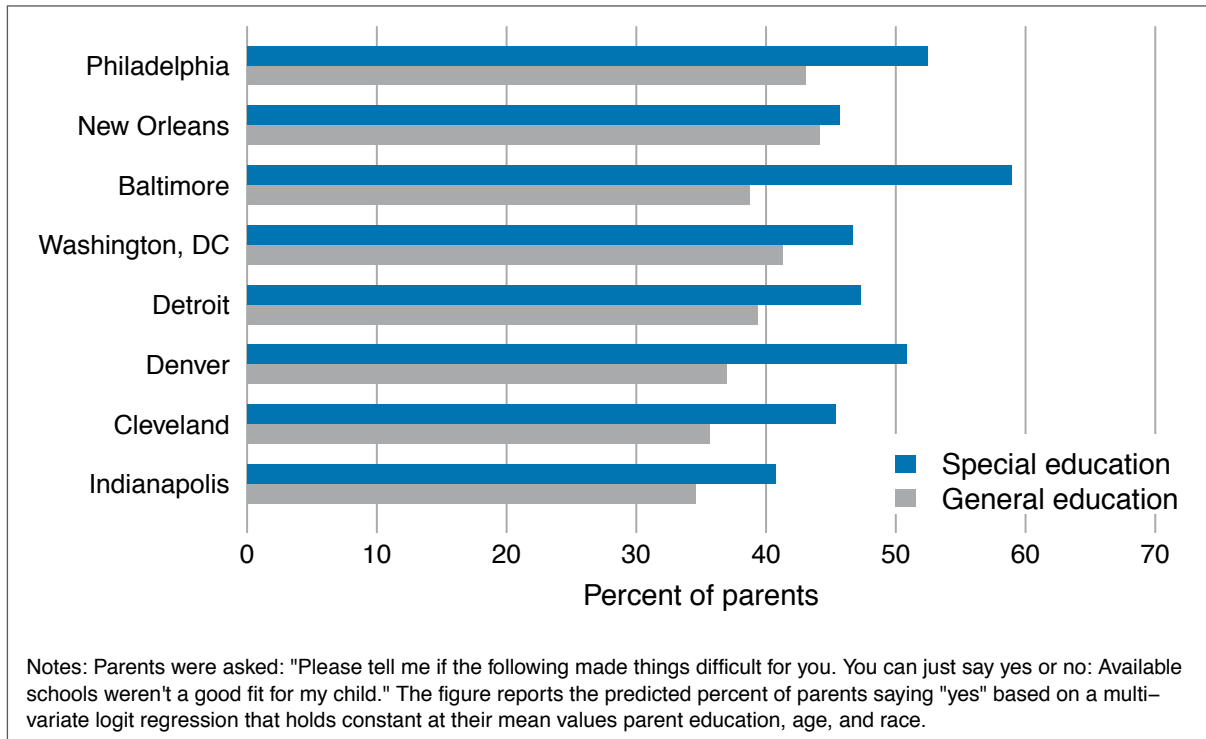
Figure 6. Many Parents Have Trouble Finding a School That Fits



Finding a good fit is even harder for parents with a child who has special needs (Figure 7). With the exception of New Orleans, parents who have a child with special needs are significantly more likely than other parents to report

that the schools available were not a good fit for their child. The largest gaps were in Baltimore (20 percent), Denver (14 percent), and Detroit (8 percent).

Figure 7. Parents of Children With Special Needs Are Significantly More Likely to Struggle to Find a Good Fit

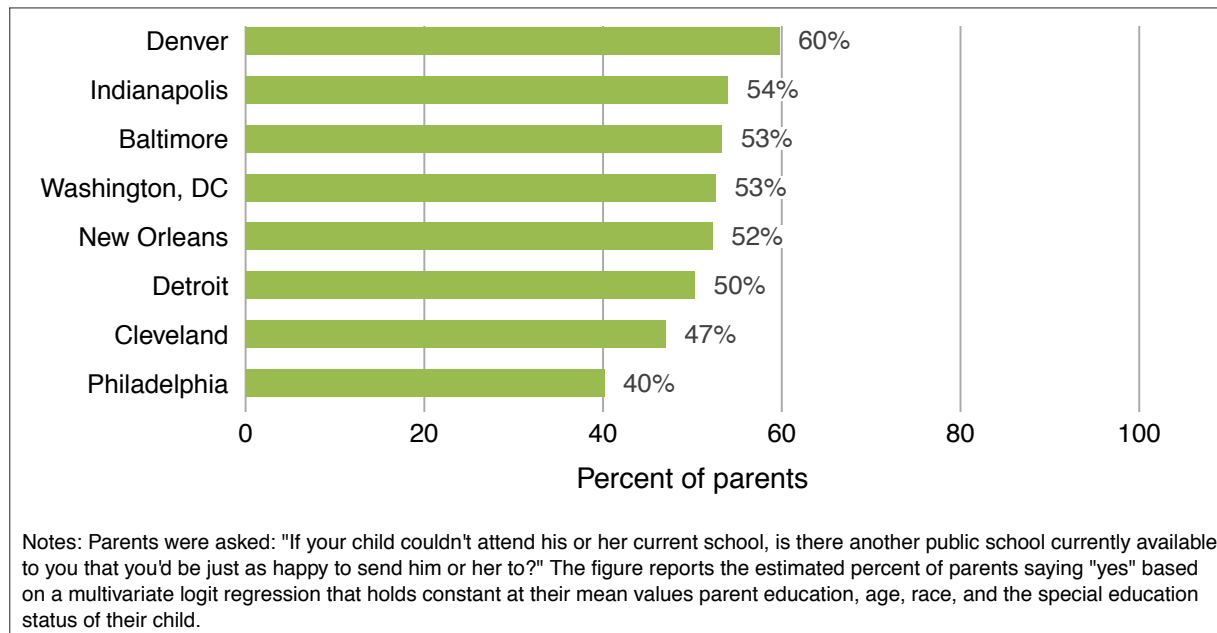


In some cities, parents with a bachelor's degree or more were much more likely to report trouble finding a school that fit than parents with less education. In Baltimore, parents with more education were 52 percent more likely to report that the available schools did not provide a good fit compared to parents with less education. These same parents were 28 percent more likely in Denver, 25 percent more likely in New Orleans, 19 percent more likely in Philadelphia, and 20 percent more likely in D.C. In Cleveland, Detroit, and Indianapolis, these parents were no more or less likely to cite fit as a problem.

Only Half of Parents Said They Have Another Good Option

School choice implies that parents can choose from two or more alternatives. Yet, when we asked parents if, in addition to their current school, they had another good public school option available to them, only half said yes (Figure 8). City results vary considerably: for example, 40 percent of parents in Philadelphia reported having another good option compared to 60 percent in Denver.

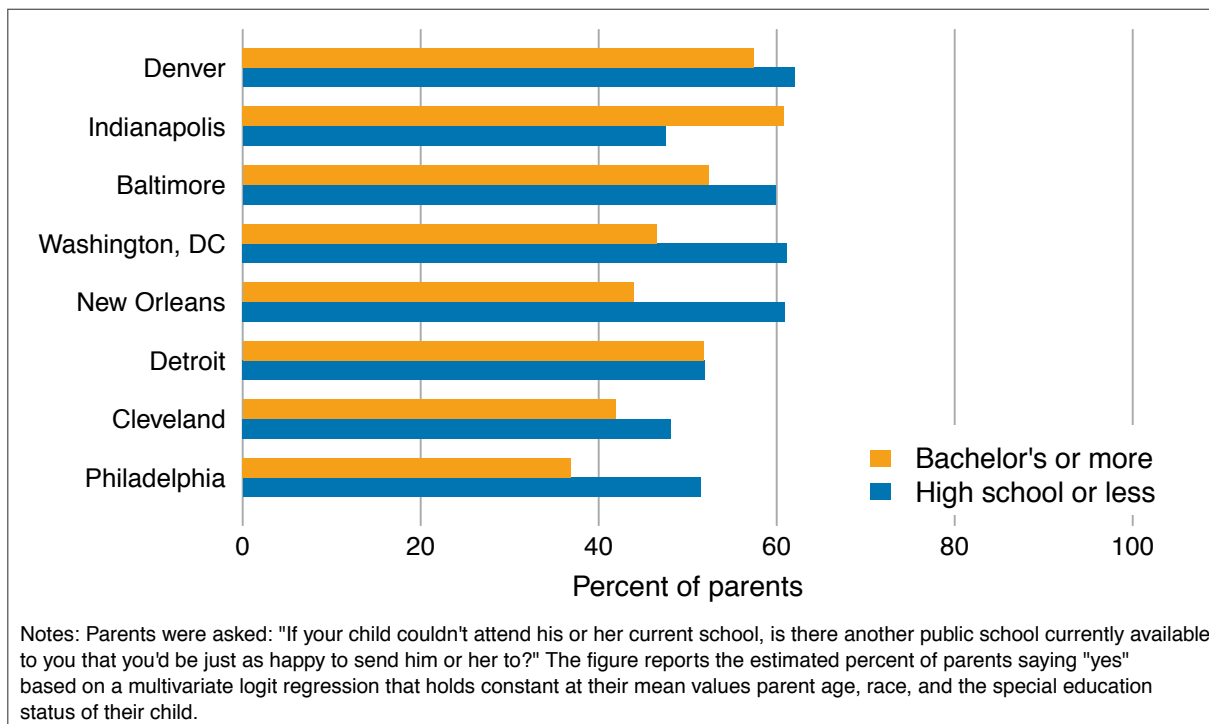
Figure 8. Half of Parents Have Another Good Option Besides Their Current School



The gap between parents with different levels of education reporting another good option varies across the cities (Figure 9). In Indianapolis, for example, parents with more education were more likely to report having other good options. But in other cities—New Orleans, D.C., Philadelphia,

Denver, Cleveland, and Baltimore—parents with less education were more likely to report having another good option available to them. Detroit is the only city where there are no significant differences between parents with different levels of education.

Figure 9. Availability of Other Good Options Varies by City and Parent Education

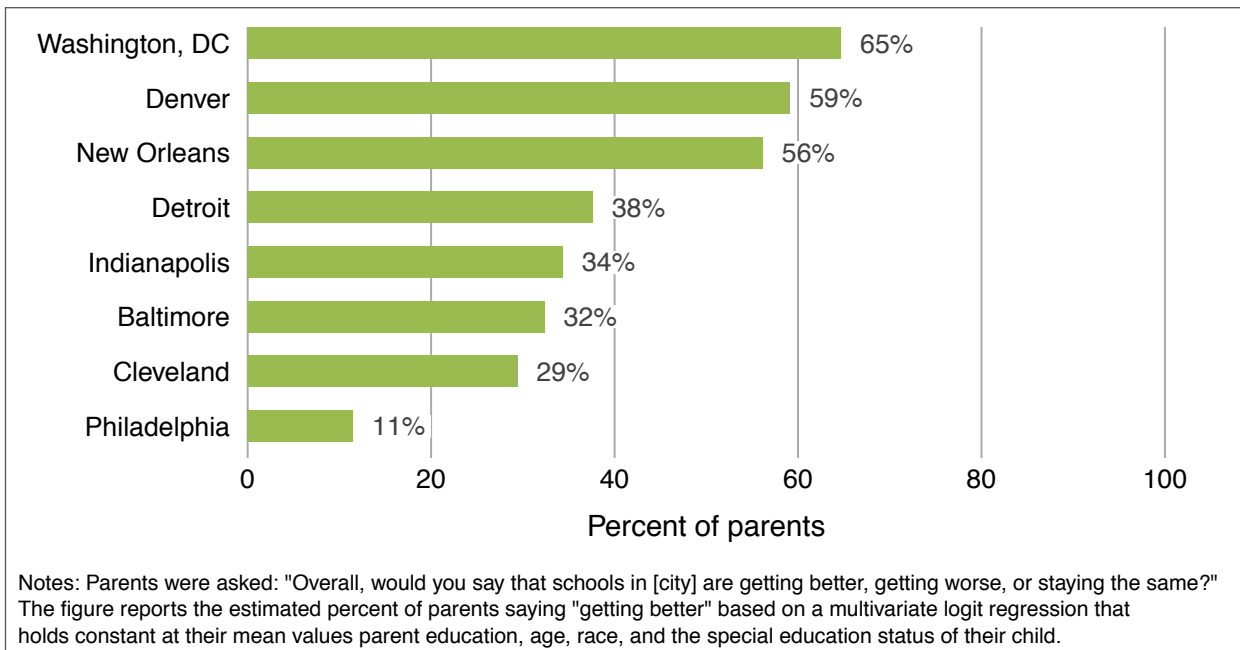


Parents in Some Cities Have a More Positive Outlook on Schools Than Others

We also asked parents whether they thought schools in their city were getting better, getting worse, or staying the same. Figure 10 depicts the estimated percentage of parents who reported that their city’s school system was getting better. More than any other question, this one showed the widest range of responses among cities. Parents in D.C. were six times more likely than parents in Philadelphia to report that their city’s schools were getting better.

Across all of the cities, parent outlook does not appear to be related to whether parents enrolled their child in a neighborhood school or a non-neighborhood-based school, and parents with more education were no more or less likely to report a positive outlook.

Figure 10. Wide Variability by City in Parents’ Outlook on Their School System



Do Optimistic Parents Have More Trust in the School System to Provide Great Public Schools?

In general, cities in which parents had a positive outlook on the public school system did not necessarily score well when we asked parents whether or not they trusted the school system to provide great public schools. Parents in Detroit, Indianapolis, Baltimore, Cleveland, and Philadelphia were nearly twice as likely to trust the school system as they were to report the schools were getting better. Meanwhile, parents in D.C. and New Orleans were much more likely to report the schools were getting better than they were to say that they trust the school system (Table 2). Denver was the only city where reported levels of trust and confidence aligned with parents’ outlook on the school system.

Table 2. Parent Trust and Optimism Are Unrelated

CITY	SCHOOLS GETTING BETTER	TRUST AND CONFIDENCE IN SCHOOL SYSTEM
Washington, DC	65%	50%
Denver	59%	63%
New Orleans	56%	42%
Detroit	38%	66%
Indianapolis	34%	57%
Baltimore	32%	45%
Cleveland	29%	56%
Philadelphia	11%	26%

Note: The second column reports the percent of parents who reported that the schools are getting better. The third column reports the percent of parents who reported a great deal or fair amount of trust and confidence in the school system to provide all neighborhoods with great public schools. Both are based on multivariate logit regression models that hold constant at their mean values parent education, age, race, and the special education status of the child.

Within some cities, racial and ethnic groups appear to view their city's school system in a different light (Table 3).¹⁷ In Denver, for example, white parents were significantly less likely than non-white parents to say the schools were getting better. In Detroit, black parents were more optimistic than either white or Hispanic parents. In Indianapolis, Hispanic parents were more likely to report the schools were getting better. In New Orleans, white parents were significantly more optimistic than either black or Hispanic parents about

the performance of the school system. Of all the cities, the largest gap in parent outlook was in D.C., where 81 percent of white parents reported a positive outlook, compared to just 57 percent of black parents and 63 percent of Hispanic parents. By contrast, in Baltimore, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Indianapolis, few differences were observed in the rates at which white, black, and Hispanic parents reported their city's schools were getting better.

Table 3. Black Parents Much Less Optimistic Than White Parents in Washington, D.C. and New Orleans

CITY	WHITE PARENTS	BLACK PARENTS	HISPANIC PARENTS
Baltimore	34%	33%	34%
Cleveland	30%	30%	31%
Denver	58%	63%	64%
Detroit	29%	41%	34%
Indianapolis	35%	37%	44%
New Orleans	68%	53%	39%
Philadelphia	15%	12%	13%
Washington, DC	81%	57%	63%

Notes: Parents were asked: "Overall, would you say that schools in [city] are getting better, getting worse, or staying the same?" The figure reports the estimated percent of parents saying "getting better" based on a multivariate logit regression that holds constant at their mean values parent education, age, and special education status of their child.

WHAT ARE PARENTS LOOKING FOR IN A SCHOOL? WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?

In each of our cities, we wanted to know what parents were looking for in a school and how, if at all, they made trade-offs between academic performance, safety, and location when choosing a school. We also wanted to know about the barriers parents face when choosing a school.

Parents Prioritize Academic Quality, But Some Face Trade-offs With Safety and Location

In the survey, we asked parents to report the most important factor in choosing a school among three possible criteria: academic quality, location, and safety. Of course, all three attributes matter to families; the relationship between academic quality, location, and safety are complex and, in many cases, intertwined. For example, safety is likely the most important consideration up to a point (e.g., no parent will choose a dangerous school) but beyond a certain threshold, safety might recede and academics might come to the forefront. Similarly, location probably matters to everyone, but within a certain distance it may be relatively less important.

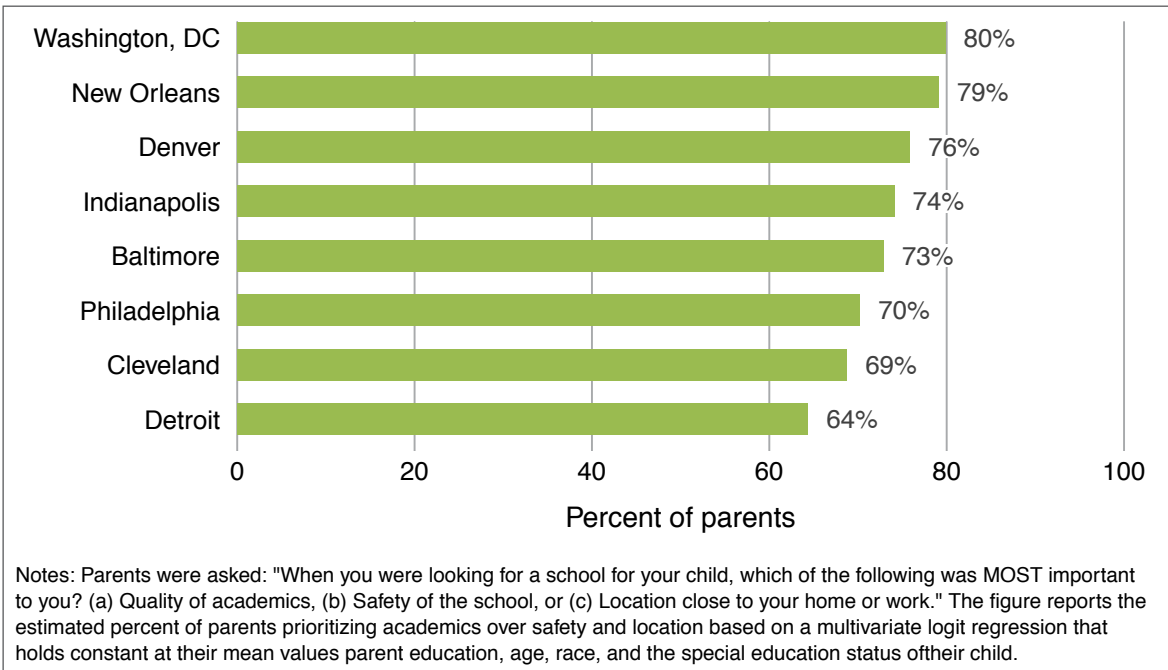
In our question, we tried to get at the types of trade-offs parents sometimes have to make by forcing parents to pick the most important attribute they look for when choosing a school. Analysis of the results from this question cannot tell us how much parents actually value academics or location, but it can tell us parents' stated priorities, given their constraints and opportunities.¹⁸

Figure 11 shows the percentage of parents in each city who said academic quality was the most important factor in their choice, holding constant the demographic characteristics of parents in the cities. A strong majority of parents in each city reported prioritizing academics over location and safety. But the results reveal some substantial differences as well. For example, even after accounting for the differences in age, race, and parent education status, 80 percent of parents in D.C. reported prioritizing academics over safety and location, compared to just 64 percent in Detroit and 69 percent in Cleveland.

17. We do not report on Asian respondents because in virtually every case, the sample size was too small to provide reliable estimates.

18. We know from previous research that parents tend to over-report the importance of academics. See Mark Schneider and Jack Buckley, "What do Parents Want From Schools? Evidence From the Internet," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 24, no. 2 (2002): 133-144.

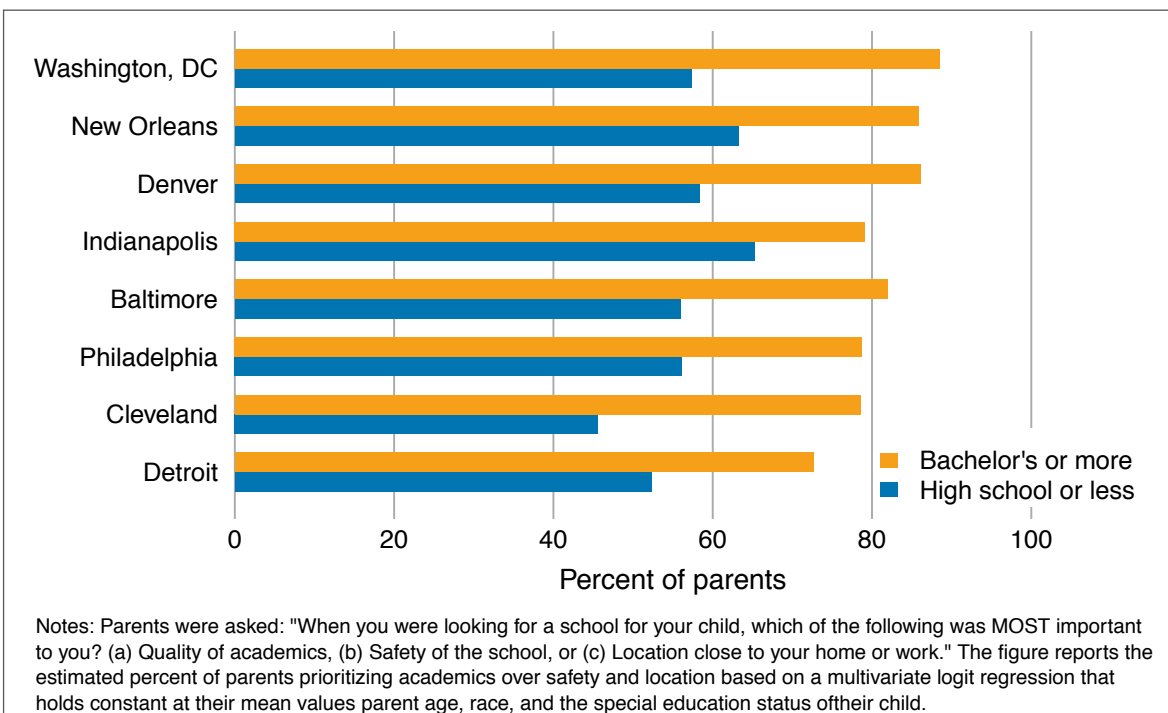
Figure 11. A Strong Majority of Parents Choose a School Based on Quality of Academics



When we broke out the results by parent education level, we found that parents with more education were more likely to say they prioritize academics as the most important factor in choosing a school and less likely to prioritize location and safety (Figure 12). In D.C., 88 percent of parents with a college degree reported academics to be the most important factor in choosing a school, compared to just 57 percent of parents with a high school diploma or less, a gap of 31

percent. In Cleveland, 79 percent of parents with a college degree cited academics, compared to just 46 percent of parents with a high school diploma or less, a gap of 33 percent. While these results cannot tell us whether less advantaged parents value academics less, it seems likely that safety and location are more important when some of the available schools are unsafe or when few good schools are available near home.¹⁹

Figure 12. More Educated Parents Are Likely to Prioritize Academics



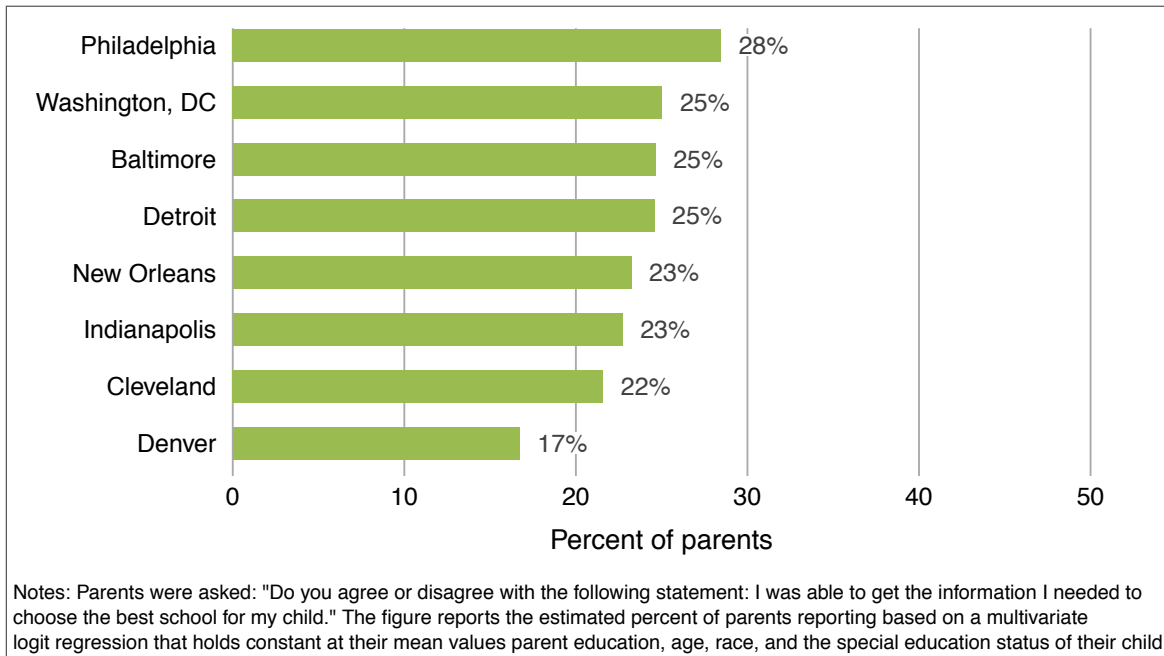
19. Of course, parent education is not a perfect indicator of socioeconomic status. As a result, some parents with higher levels of education may reside in neighborhoods with unsafe schools, just as some parents with lower levels of education may reside in neighborhoods with lots of high-quality options.

Information Is a Key Barrier to Choice; Parents Prefer Interactive Sources

To get the most out of public school choice, parents need information on their options, including the quality of academic programming, the availability of transportation, and the process of enrolling. This is true whether they are considering a school in their local school district or a charter school (as we describe later in Part 3, the types of information sources available to parents vary considerably).

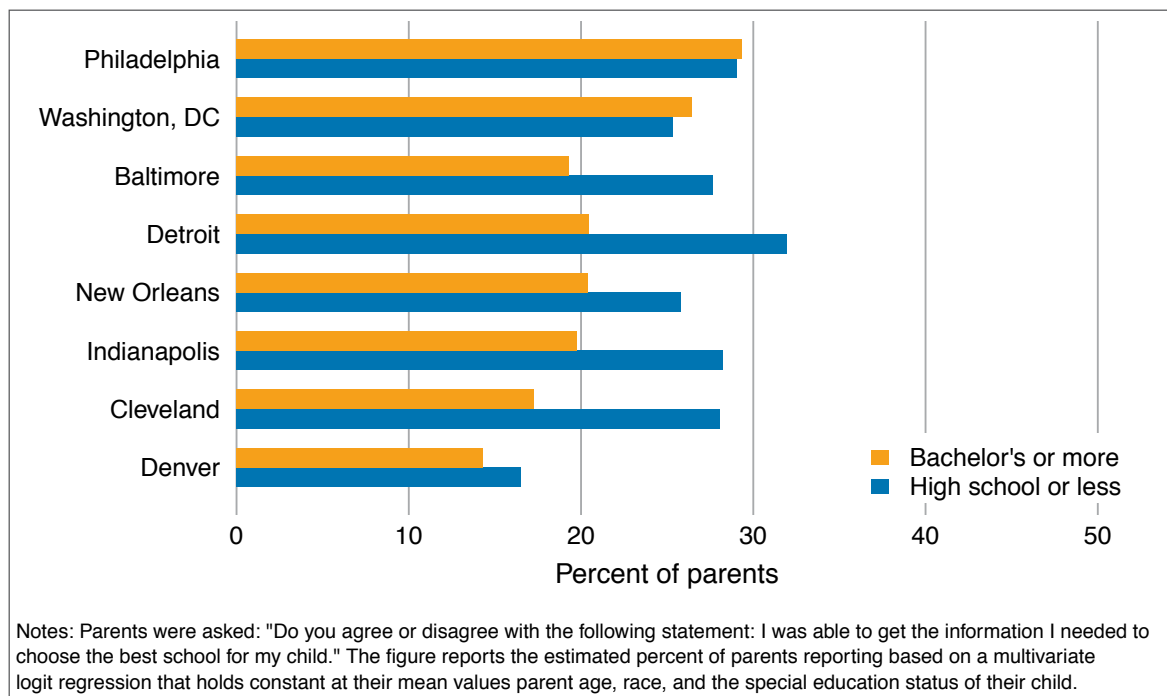
On average, a quarter or more of parents in the cities reported that they struggled to get the information they needed to choose a school, but city-specific results varied (Figure 13). In Philadelphia, for example, 28 percent of parents reported not having the information needed to choose. In Denver, only 17 percent of parents reported that they struggled to get information.

Figure 13. About a Quarter of Parents Struggle to Get the Information They Need to Choose



In some cities, parents with less education appear much more likely than parents with more education to report that they struggled to get the information they needed to make a choice (Figure 14). For example, a parent with a high school diploma or less in Cleveland is 63 percent more

likely to identify information as a barrier. In Detroit, less educated parents are 57 percent more likely to report that they struggled with information. But in Philadelphia, around a quarter of parents—regardless of education level—identified information as a challenge.

Figure 14. Less Educated Parents Struggle to Get Information

We also asked parents what *types* of information they used, including school websites, the district website, local parent guides (whether produced by the district or a nonprofit), and school choice fairs.

It is clear that parents rely on multiple sources.²⁰ On average, parents reported using between two and three official sources of information, with little variation between the cities. Parents with a bachelor's degree or more reported using more information sources than parents with a high school diploma or less, but these differences were small: 0.6 additional information sources in Philadelphia and 0.4 in Detroit and Denver. In every city, by wide margins, school visits were far and away the most popular information gathering method—approximately half of parents reported school visits provided the most useful information.

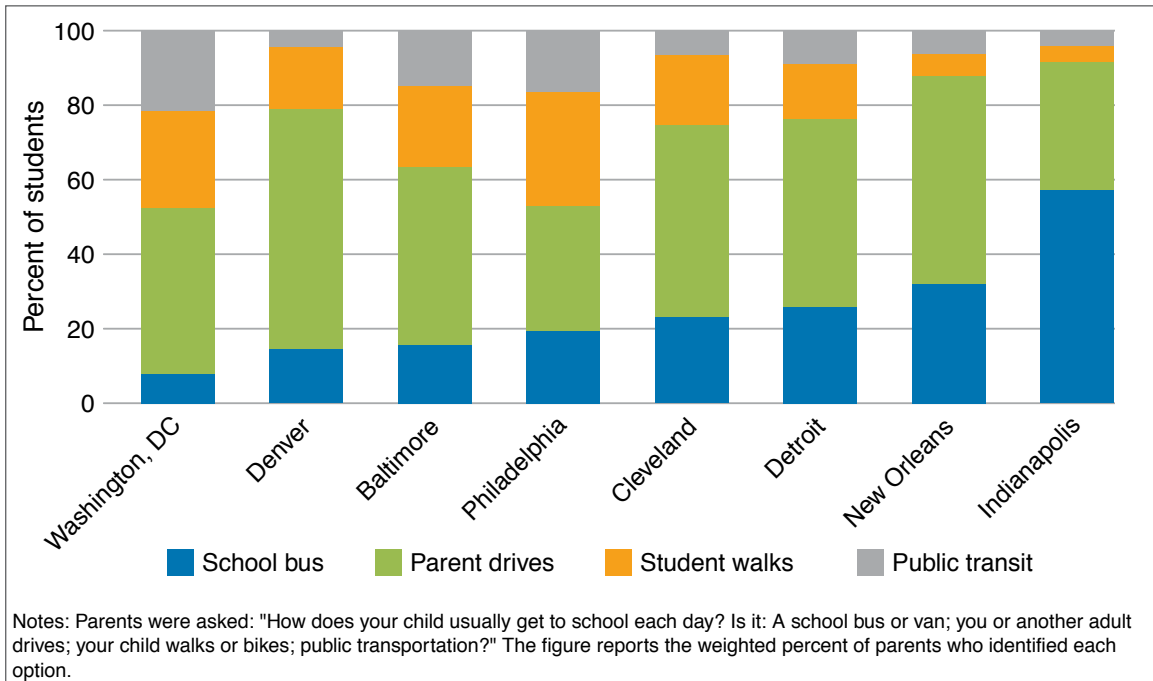
Lack of Transportation Makes It Difficult for Parents to Choose a School

Traditionally, charter schools and other non-neighborhood-based schools (e.g., magnets or selective-admission schools) do not provide transportation to and from school. New Orleans is the only city in our sample where charter schools are required to provide students with free transportation. Whether transportation poses a barrier to families depends not just on the availability of free school transportation, but also on a city's geography and the quality of its public transit system.

Figure 15 depicts the mode of transportation parents reported using to get their child to and from school. In every city but Indianapolis, most parents reported driving their children to school. Among the cities with the highest levels of choice—New Orleans, D.C., and Detroit—variability is evident based on the type of transportation provided. In New Orleans, parents were most likely to report their child travels to school on a school bus, those in D.C. were most likely to report using public transit, and those in Detroit were most likely to report driving their child.

20. We did not ask parents about friends/family as a source of information since it has been established in the literature that this is among the most drawn-upon source of information. In addition, we wanted to focus on information sources that city leaders can leverage more effectively.

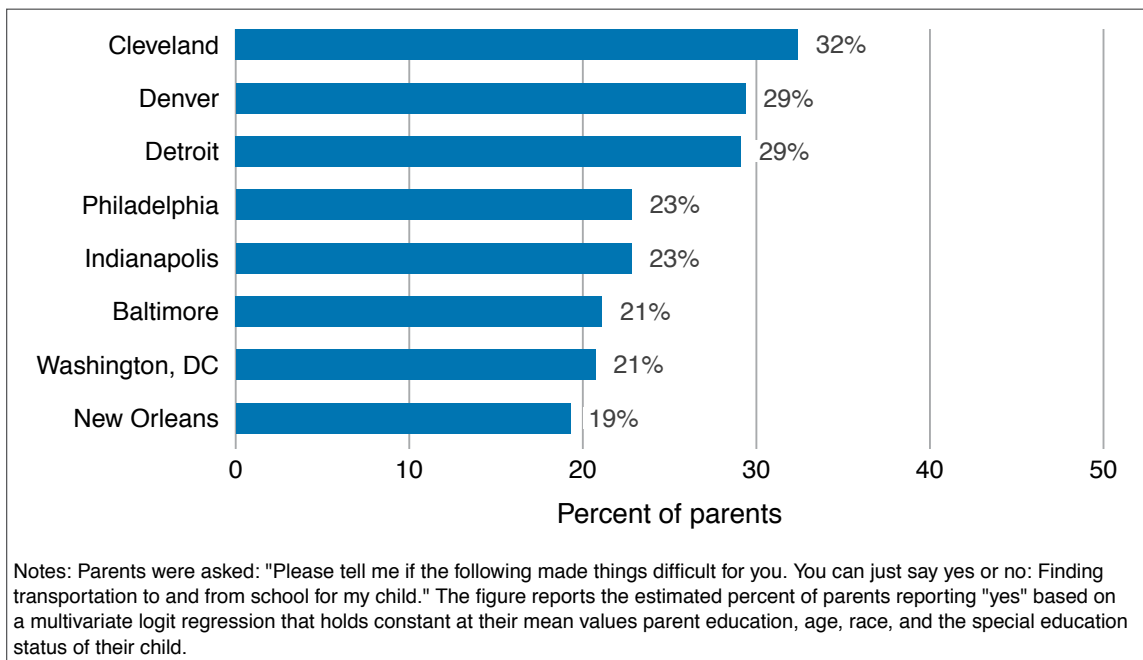
Figure 15. How Do Children Get to School?



As Figure 16 shows, many parents identified transportation as a barrier to choosing a school, although rates vary by city. Controlling for differences in city demographics, parents in Cleveland are 68 percent *more likely* to identify transportation as a barrier, compared to their peers in New

Orleans, the only city where charter schools are required to provide transportation. Parents that reported driving their children to school were more likely than other parents to identify transportation as a barrier to choice.

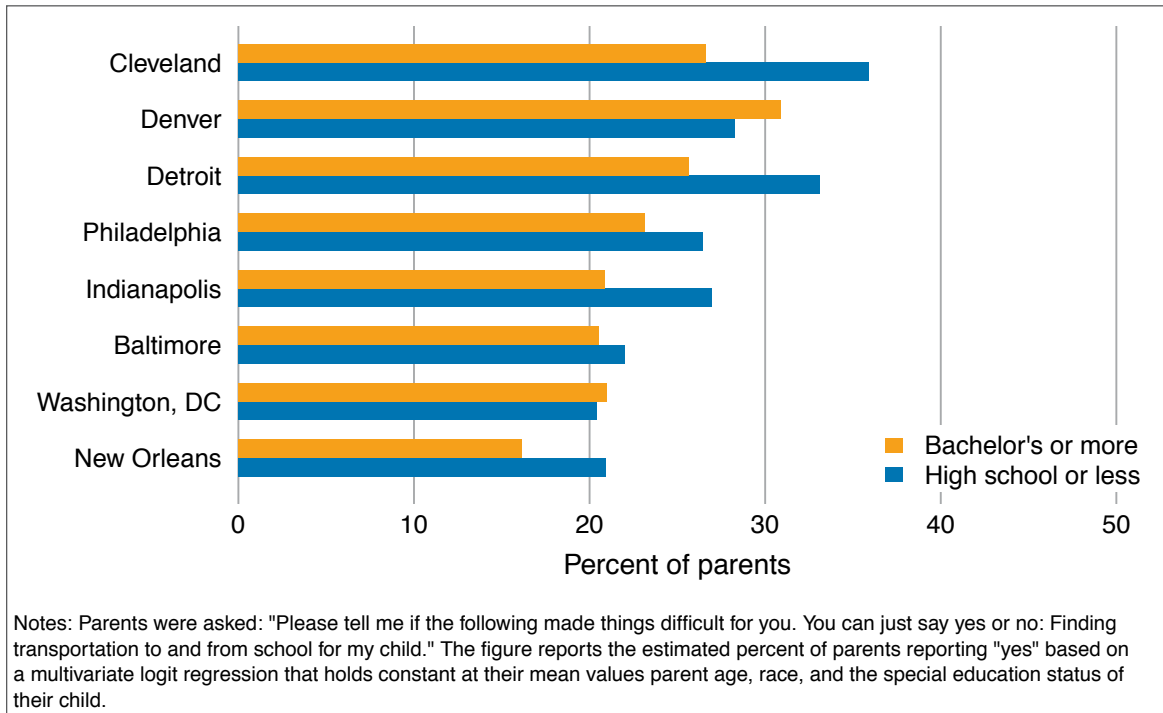
Figure 16. Many Parents Identify Transportation as a Problem



In many cities—but not all—parents with less formal education were more likely to report trouble with transportation (Figure 17). These differences were particularly large in Cleveland and Detroit. A parent with a high school diploma or less was 35 percent more likely to identify

transportation as a barrier in Cleveland, and 29 percent more likely in Detroit. While these gaps are important, it is interesting to note that across the cities transportation was a significant barrier even for more advantaged families.

Figure 17. Transportation Is a Bigger Challenge for Less Educated Parents

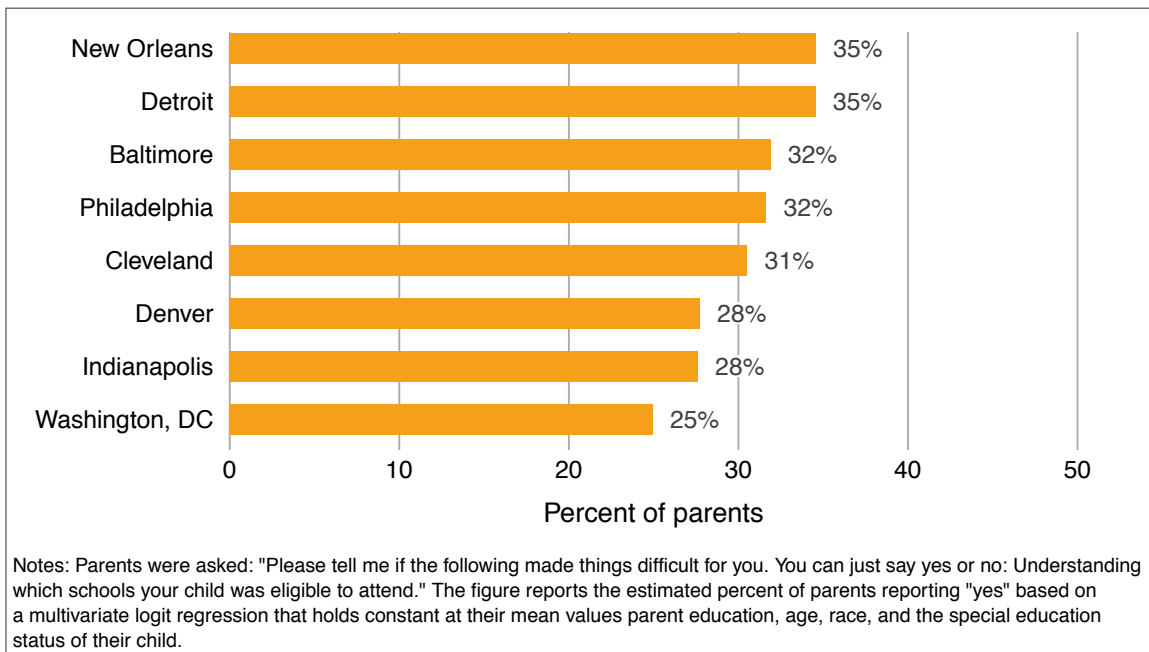


Understanding Eligibility Requirements Is a Significant Concern

To choose a school, parents first must understand which schools their child is eligible to attend. Eligibility requirements vary from school to school and city to city. Charter schools typically do not have priority enrollment (other than for siblings of existing students), but other public schools may include preferences based on where

the child lives or, in the case of selective-admission schools, preferences based on test scores and other entry requirements such as auditions. The survey results suggest that understanding eligibility requirements is a widespread challenge for parents (Figure 18).

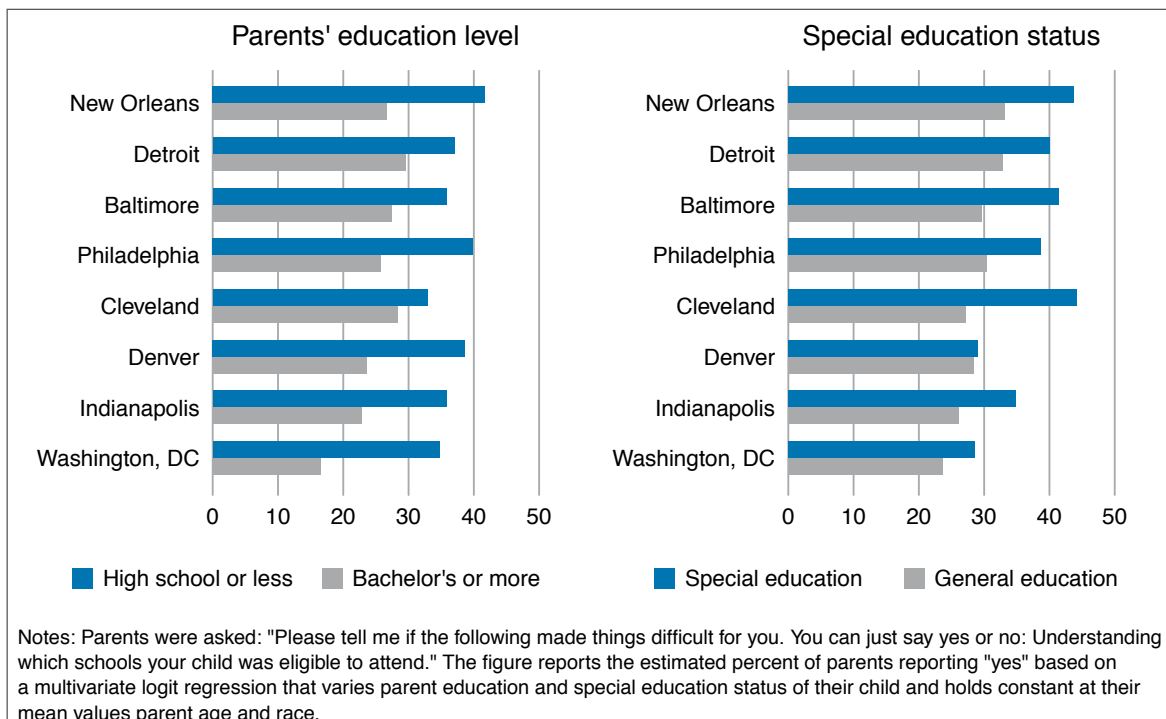
Figure 18. Confusion Over Eligibility Is Among the Most Cited Barriers to School Choice



Understanding eligibility requirements appears to be a particular problem for parents with less formal education and for parents who have a child with special needs (Figure 19). But again, there is a great deal of variation across the cities. For example, in Washington, D.C., parents with less education are at a significant disadvantage: twice as many parents with a high school education or less reported struggling with eligibility standards compared to parents with more education. In Cleveland, 44 percent of parents who have a

child with special needs reported struggling to understand eligibility standards, compared to just 27 percent of other parents. Interestingly, looking across the subgroup analyses, cities with smaller gaps between parents of different education levels can have large gaps among those parents who have a child with special needs, a finding that suggests these different groups of parents face different challenges when it comes to understanding eligibility.

Figure 19. Eligibility Is a Bigger Concern for Parents With Less Education and Children With Special Needs



Difficulties Managing the Enrollment Process Vary Across the Cities

When we asked parents about three other types of enrollment-related challenges—the number of applications, application deadlines, and confusing paperwork—the results were mixed (Figure 20).²¹ Parents in New Orleans, Philadelphia, D.C., and Detroit consistently reported having more difficulty compared to parents in Cleveland, Indianapolis, Denver, and Baltimore. Across all of the cities,

parents reported struggling the most with application deadlines. This makes sense given the high stakes in cities with lots of choice but limited high-quality schools: missing a deadline in New Orleans, for example, pushes parents into a “Round 2 Application Window” when the most popular schools have no openings left.

Figure 20. Wide Variation in Parents' Difficulty With Enrollment Process

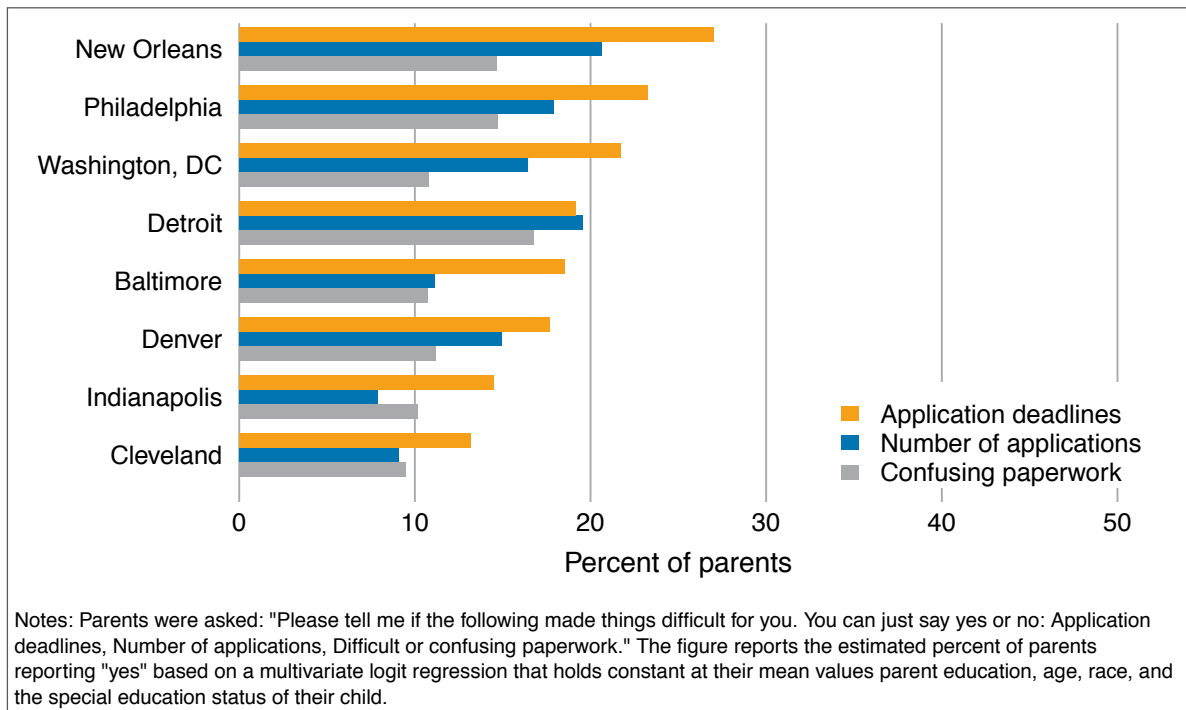
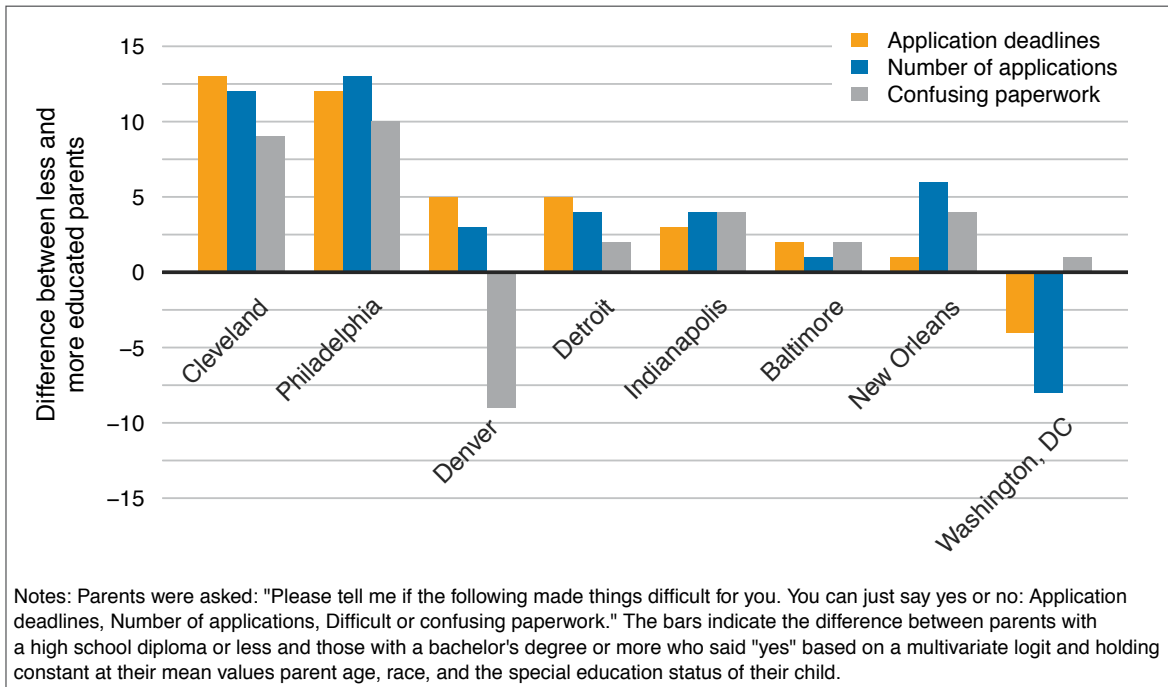


Figure 21 shows the estimated gaps between parents with a high school diploma or less and parents with a bachelor's degree or more who reported challenges with enrollment. Positive numbers in the table indicate parents with less education were *more likely* to identify one of the enrollment-related challenges: confusing paperwork, number of applications, different deadlines. With a few exceptions, parents with less education struggled the most.

This is especially true in Philadelphia and Cleveland, where approximately twice as many parents with a high school diploma or less reported struggling with enrollment-related challenges compared to parents with a bachelor's degree or more. In D.C., parents with more education were *more likely* to report struggling with enrollment-related challenges, an interesting twist that likely reflects the competition for a small number of highly desirable schools.

21. At the time of the survey, Denver and New Orleans had implemented common enrollment systems. Because parents are reflecting on their experiences enrolling their child, surveyed parents may or may not have experience with the common enrollment system and thus may be reporting on their experience with a decentralized enrollment system. We also analyzed the results based on year of enrollment. As discussed in Part 3, parents in Denver were less likely to report trouble with the enrollment process if they enrolled their child after the implementation of common enrollment. The same was not true in New Orleans, where parents reported greater difficulty if they enrolled their child after the implementation of common enrollment.

Figure 21. Least Advantaged Parents Most Likely to Struggle With Enrollment Process



Part 3: How Parents' Experiences Vary Across Different Contexts

In this final part of the report we consider the policy investments cities have made to support school choice, the types of governance systems that were more (or less) likely to initiate these investments, and whether their policy investments or governance arrangements appear to be related to how parents experience school choice. It is important to note that in all but three of our cases (Denver, Baltimore, and Philadelphia), the responsibility for investing in systems to support school choice goes far beyond the main public school district to include other agencies, including charter school authorizers and other, smaller school districts.

HOW POLICY SHAPES PARENTS' EXPERIENCE WITH CHOICE

The results presented in Part 2 depend on many complex factors, including the resources parents have, the policies and systems that structure school choice (e.g., availability of transportation), and the larger city environment including its geography, public transit options, and community support organizations. While school system leaders cannot alter the characteristics of the families or, in most cases, the city environment, they can invest in systems and policies that support families in the process of choosing a school.

Cities Have Made Different Investments in Systems That Support School Choice

The eight cities in this report have made different investments in transportation, enrollment, and information that, at least in theory, shape how parents exercise school choice. To complement the survey data from parents, we collected additional data on the cities in order to rate each city on the comprehensiveness of its parent information systems (provided by the local school district or local nonprofit agency), the extent to which its enrollment

systems are coordinated across different types of schools, and whether or not children have free and convenient transportation to neighborhood and non-neighborhood-based public school options.

Table 4 reports our assessment of each city's investments as of March 2014 (see Technical Appendix C for more details on how we rated the cities). These systems are in a state of flux and in some cases our evaluations are already out of date. For example, at the time of the survey, Cleveland provided comprehensive information on its district-run schools but lacked information on charter schools. Since then, Cleveland has launched a new website for the 2014–2015 school year that includes information on all publicly funded schools.

As Table 4 shows, cities' investments in systems that support parent choice are uneven. Of the three policy areas, the cities have invested the most in parent information. Five of the eight cities have comprehensive parent information systems in place that allow parents to search and compare all public schools in the city by academic quality, curriculum, and other factors. Two more, Detroit and Cleveland, have subsequently expanded their investments in parent information.

Table 4. Cities Have Made Different Investments in Systems That Support Parent Choice

CITY	PARENT INFORMATION	ENROLLMENT	TRANSPORTATION
Cleveland	Little Investment	Little Investment	Little Investment
Detroit	Moderate Investment	Little Investment	Little Investment
Indianapolis	Significant Investment	Little Investment	Little Investment
Baltimore	Moderate Investment	Moderate Investment	Little Investment
Philadelphia	Significant Investment	Little Investment	Moderate Investment
Denver	Significant Investment	Significant Investment	Little Investment
Washington, DC	Significant Investment	Moderate Investment	Moderate Investment
New Orleans	Significant Investment	Significant Investment	Significant Investment
LEGEND	LITTLE INVESTMENT	MODERATE INVESTMENT	SIGNIFICANT INVESTMENT

Notes: Ratings were developed by considering the policies and systems in place as of March 2014 that shape parents' experiences with choice. In most cases, the public school district does not have full responsibility for the system of public schools, and responsibility for these systems is spread across multiple actors. As a result, ratings reflect city, not district, investments.

On enrollment, two cities—New Orleans and Denver—have invested in common enrollment systems that allow parents to choose a charter or district school using a single application (since the survey was administered, D.C. also launched a common enrollment system). In contrast, four cities have decentralized enrollment systems that require families to submit multiple applications at different times to enroll in non-neighborhood-based public school options.

Table 4 also shows that transportation investments vary across the cities. Only New Orleans requires most non-neighborhood public schools to provide transportation. Washington, D.C., subsidizes public transit passes for all children whether they attend a charter school or a district school and whether they are in elementary or high school. Philadelphia subsidizes public transit for high school students, but not elementary students. But the

remaining cities provide partial, incomplete, or nonexistent transportation to non-neighborhood-based public schools.

Supporting Policies Are a Work In Progress

Admittedly, the systems that support parent choice are very new in most of the survey cities and parents are still learning how to access these systems and navigate their choices. As a result, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the relationship between each city's policy investments and parents' experiences. Nevertheless, we find some suggestive evidence that parents have an easier time navigating their choices in cities that have invested in support systems (Table 5). For example, parents were less likely to report lack of transportation as a limitation in New Orleans, where all schools provide transportation, and in D.C., where subsidized high-quality public transit is readily available.

Table 5. Mixed Evidence on Whether Investments Paid Off

CITY	INFORMATION	TRANSPORTATION
Baltimore	25%	21%
Cleveland	22%	32%
Denver	17%	29%
Detroit	25%	29%
Indianapolis	23%	23%
New Orleans	23%	19%
Philadelphia	28%	23%
Washington, DC	25%	21%

Notes: Parents were asked: (1) 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? (2) 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: Finding transportation for my child to get to and from school. The table reports the predicted percent of parents reporting information and transportation as a barrier based on a multivariate logit regression and holding constant at their mean values parent education, age, race, and special education status of the child.

At the same time, parents appear no more or less likely to report having the information they need in cities with the most comprehensive information systems. For example, parents in Philadelphia were more likely than other parents to report information as a barrier, even though Philadelphia has a comprehensive parent information system (the guide was launched in 2012).

On enrollment, two of the cities in our sample—Denver and New Orleans—have recently implemented common enrollment systems to simplify the process of enrolling in non-neighborhood-based public schools. Because these systems are very new, these results should be interpreted cautiously: parents in Denver reported fewer enrollment-related barriers after the implementation of common enrollment, and the gap between parents of different education levels narrowed; but in New Orleans, parents of all education levels reported greater problems with enrollment after implementation of common enrollment (an increase between 5 percent and 7 percent).

Interestingly, parents reported a more positive outlook on schools in cities that have invested the most: D.C., Denver, and New Orleans. Of course, these three cities have also undergone other reforms, including changes in the type and quality of schools offered to families, so it is impossible to

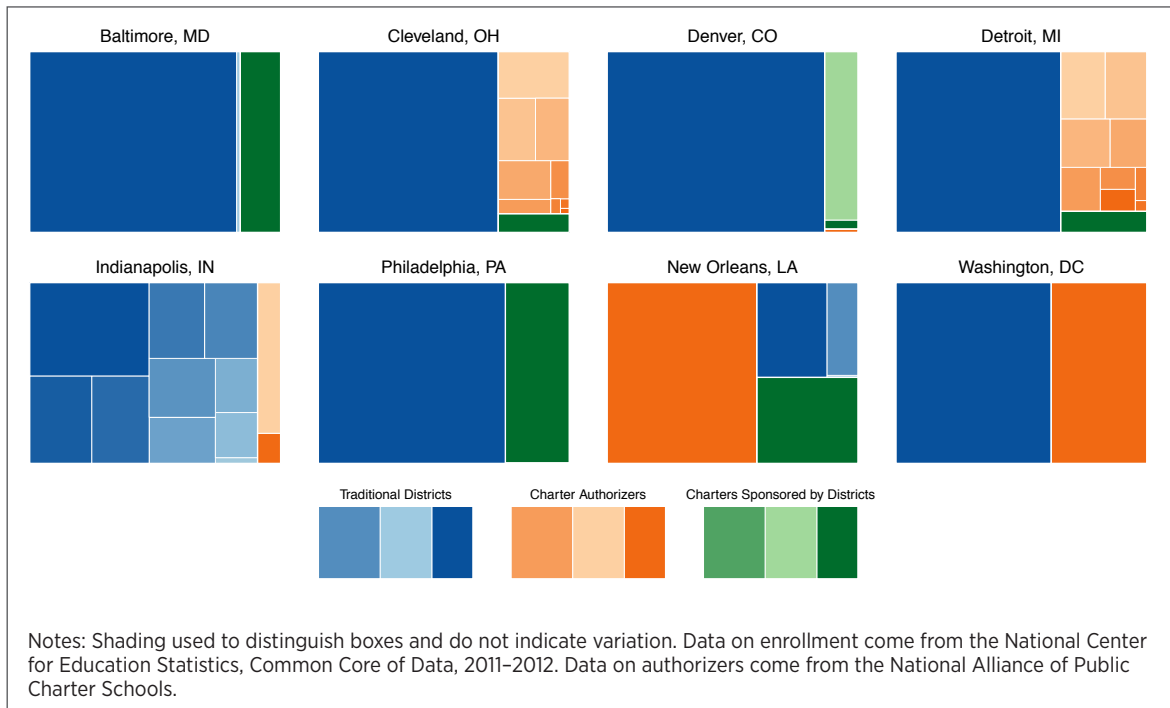
say how much of their positive outlook on the public school system is related to the investments or to the broader reform efforts in these cities.

HOW GOVERNANCE SHAPES PARENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH CHOICE

As we noted earlier, education in the eight cities is governed very differently. In some of the cities, a single agency is responsible for most of the publicly funded schools, district and charter alike. In other cities, a sector solution dominates in which a charter authorizer oversees city charter schools and a traditional district manager oversees the other schools. In some cities, a multitude of agencies are responsible, including higher education institutions, nonprofits, state agencies, and traditional school districts.

Figure 22 depicts the oversight agencies responsible for overseeing city schools in the eight survey cities. 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.

Figure 22. City School Systems Are Overseen by a Range of Different Governance Arrangements



Governance Can Be Enabling, But Does Not Determine Degree of Investment in Choice

Comparing the oversight arrangement portrayed in Figure 22 with the extent of investment arrayed earlier in Table 4, we find that the cities with the most actors involved in public oversight, Detroit and Cleveland, have the weakest investments in systems that support parent choice. Both cities have several charter authorizers in addition to the school district, and no one is responsible for ensuring families can navigate the system of publicly funded schools.²²

However, cities with fewer actors involved exhibit inconsistent levels of policy investment. District and charter schools in Baltimore are all overseen by Baltimore City Public Schools, yet Baltimore’s investments are similar to those in Detroit, where nearly a dozen different entities oversee public schools. Likewise, in Philadelphia all publicly funded schools are overseen by the School District of Philadelphia, yet a local nonprofit manages the parent information system. Consolidating authority into one or two agencies can make coming to agreement much easier, but these results suggest unitary governance is no guarantee that the requisite policy investments will be made.

Governance Is Unrelated to Parents’ Trust in the School System

As for how governance might relate to parent experiences, we wondered whether more consolidated governance structures might be associated with higher levels of trust in the system. We might expect, for example, that parents would be less likely to trust the school system when multiple oversight agencies are charged with managing city schools. And yet, as Table 6 shows, we find little relationship between governance and trust. In Detroit, where schools are overseen by more than a dozen organizations, 63 percent of parents reported trust and confidence in the school system leaders to provide all neighborhoods with great schools. By contrast, only 30 percent of Philadelphians reported that same confidence, even though a single school district oversees all district- and charter-run schools.

Earlier, we showed that parents of different racial and ethnic groups in some cities have different views of the school system. Race and ethnicity also appeared to be related to parents’ trust and confidence in the school system, but again the effect varies across the cities. In Cleveland and Detroit, black parents (48 percent in Cleveland, 60 percent in Detroit)

22. Both Cleveland and Detroit have nonprofits (the Cleveland Transformation Alliance and Excellent Schools Detroit) that have stepped in to put pressure on authorizers and help families navigate their options.

Table 6. Governance Is Unrelated to Parents' Trust in the School System to Provide All Neighborhoods With Great Public Schools

CITY	CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS	% PARENTS REPORTING FAIR AMOUNT OR GREAT DEAL OF TRUST
Detroit	12	66%
Denver	2	63%
Indianapolis	2	57%
Cleveland	9	56%
Washington, DC	1	50%
Baltimore	1	45%
New Orleans	2	42%
Philadelphia	1	26%

Notes: Parents were asked: "How much trust and confidence do you have in the city's public school system to make sure all neighborhoods have great schools?" The figure reports the predicted percent of parents saying "a great deal" or "fair amount" based on a multivariate logit regression and holding constant at their mean values parent education, age, race and special education status of the child.

and Hispanic parents (50 percent in Cleveland, 69 percent in Detroit) were significantly less likely than white parents (64 percent in Cleveland, 74 percent in Detroit) to report trusting the school system to make sure that all neighborhoods have great schools. In Denver, New Orleans, and D.C., the opposite pattern emerges, with white parents (57 percent in Denver, 33 percent in New Orleans, 41 percent in D.C.) less likely than

their black (65 percent in Denver, 47 percent in New Orleans, and 53 percent in D.C.) and Hispanic (73 percent in Denver, 54 percent in New Orleans, and 44 percent in D.C.) peers to trust the school system to make great options available. No significant differences were observed across parents in Baltimore, Indianapolis, and Philadelphia.

Conclusion

Our findings make clear that every city—even those that have done the most to help families manage the choice process—have much work ahead. No city looks good on every, or even most, measures. Across the board, families with less education and those whose children qualify for special education services struggle more.

Moving forward, civic leaders in these and other cities can take some concrete lessons from our results:

- **Aggressively attend to the supply of high-quality schools.** The single biggest constraint parents face in choosing a school is the lack of high-quality options available to them. Cities need a viable plan for improving existing schools while attracting a diverse array of new high-quality school providers.
- **Recognize that different choosers have different needs.** Cities should take a close look at which parents are struggling the most to navigate their choices and develop new, customized solutions for them. The groups that need additional support vary from city to city and much depends on contextual factors, such as the availability of high-quality schools in different neighborhoods.
- **Guarantee free and safe passage to schools.** For many families, including those that are well resourced, the lack of transportation severely constrains the options that are available to them. If city leaders want all families to be able to benefit from choice, they must ensure that families choosing non-neighborhood-based schools have the same transportation options as those who choose neighborhood schools.

- **Invest much more heavily in information systems.** Parents in high-choice cities are trying hard to be smart choosers but sorting through the options can be overwhelming. Cities need to develop rich information resources to help parents choose a school. A booklet listing programs and test scores is a good start but cities should do much more to support informed choice by leveraging trusted community institutions and school staff to provide the personalized and interactive sources of information parents crave.

Opening the door to more charter school and intra-district choice does not, on its own, create a functioning system of public school options. Parents want more than choice. They want a variety of high-quality schools that will allow them to find a good fit for their child. They want better ways to learn about the schools available to them. They want less confusing enrollment processes. And, they want safe passage to and from school for their child.

All families deserve access to great public school options. Our study of parents' experiences with choice suggests that many cities have a long way to go in making that goal a reality.

Technical Appendix A

WEIGHTED AND ADJUSTED ESTIMATES OF SURVEY RESPONSES

W = weighted based on Census estimates for age, race, and educational attainment.

A = adjusted based on multivariate logit model that controls for parent age, race, educational attainment, and special education status of the child.

QUESTION	BALTIMORE		CLEVELAND		DENVER		DETROIT		INDIANAPOLIS		NEW ORLEANS		PHILADELPHIA		WASHINGTON	
	W	A	W	A	W	A	W	A	W	A	W	A	W	A	W	A
Do you agree or disagree: I was able to get the information I needed to choose the best school for my child? (% Agree)	29%	25%	25%	22%	18%	17%	29%	25%	22%	23%	24%	23%	29%	26%	28%	25%
Please tell me if any of the following made things difficult for you: understanding which schools your child was eligible to attend? (% yes)	33%	32%	31%	31%	32%	38%	39%	35%	28%	28%	37%	35%	36%	32%	28%	25%
Please tell me if any of the following made things difficult for you: difficult or confusing paperwork? (% yes)	12%	11%	12%	10%	15%	11%	19%	17%	11%	10%	16%	15%	18%	15%	12%	11%
Please tell me if any of the following made things difficult for you: number of applications? (% yes)	13%	11%	15%	9%	17%	15%	25%	20%	8%	8%	22%	21%	22%	18%	18%	16%
Please tell me if any of the following made things difficult for you: different application deadlines (% yes)	20%	19%	19%	13%	19%	18%	22%	19%	14%	14%	27%	27%	28%	23%	22%	22%
Please tell me if any of the following made things difficult for you: Available schools weren't a good fit my child? (% yes)	42%	42%	40%	37%	41%	39%	45%	41%	35%	36%	44%	44%	44%	45%	45%	42%
Please tell me if any of the following made things difficult for you: finding transportation for my child to get to and from school? (% yes)	24%	21%	36%	32%	29%	29%	34%	29%	23%	23%	20%	19%	24%	23%	21%	21%

Technical Appendix A

QUESTION	BALTIMORE		CLEVELAND		DENVER		DETROIT		INDIANAPOLIS		NEW ORLEANS		PHILADELPHIA		WASHINGTON	
	W	A	W	A	W	A	W	A	W	A	W	A	W	A	W	A
Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: My child is enrolled in the school that was my first or second choice? (% agree)	78%	79%	81%	83%	83%	83%	72%	75%	82%	83%	80%	81%	74%	76.6%	78%	80%
When you were looking for a school for your child, which of the following was MOST important to you? (% quality of academics)	68%	73%	62%	69%	70%	76%	58%	64%	74%	74%	76%	79%	65%	70.23%	77.25%	79.85%
If your child couldn't attend his or her current school, is there another public schools currently available to you that you'd be just as happy to send him or her to? (% yes)	55%	53%	48%	47%	59%	60%	52%	50%	52%	54%	55%	52%	45%	40%	55%	53%
Thinking about the school your child currently attends, would you say you are satisfied or dissatisfied with the quality of education they are receiving? (% satisfied)	85%	88%	83%	84%	90%	91%	N/A	N/A	87%	88%	90%	92%	85%	87%	91%	92%
Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: My child's school is responsive to my feedback and concerns? (% agree)	85%	90%	83%	90%	90%	87%	N/A	N/A	87%	90%	90%	89%	85%	86%	91%	90%
How much trust and confidence do you have in the city's public school system to make sure all neighborhoods have great schools? (% great deal or fair amount)	45%	45%	55%	56%	66%	63%	60%	67%	57%	57%	46%	42%	32%	26%	49%	50%
Overall, would you say that schools in [CITY] are getting better, getting worse, or staying the same? (% getting better)	32%	32%	29%	29%	60%	59%	36%	38%	36%	34%	55%	56%	14%	12%	66%	65%
How much trust and confidence do you have in city government when it comes to addressing public problems? (% great deal or fair amount)	45%	37%	55%	46%	66%	63%	60%	54%	57%	53%	46%	37%	32%	31%	49%	53%

Technical Appendix B

CENSUS AND SAMPLE ESTIMATES BY RACE AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

City	EDUCATION=BACHELOR'S DEGREE OR MORE		RACE= WHITE		RACE= BLACK		RACE= HISPANIC/LATINO		RACE= ASIAN	
	Census	Sample	Census	Sample	Census	Sample	Census	Sample	Census	Sample
Baltimore	26.1%	30.3%	28%	24.5%	63.7%	65.3%	4.2%	4.1%	2.3%	1.0%
Cleveland	14.0%	22.2%	33.4%	29.6%	53.3%	54.1%	10.0%	9.2%	1.8%	1.0%
Denver	42.2%	41.6%	52.2%	36.4%	10.2%	12.1%	31.8%	45.5%	3.4%	2.0%
Detroit	12.3%	15.6%	7.8%	6.2%	82.7%	80.4%	6.8%	9.1%	1.1%	1.3%
Indianapolis	27.5%	25.4%	58.6%	54.6%	27.5%	33.3%	9.4%	7.1%	2.1%	1.0%
New Orleans	33.0%	39.4%	30.5%	22.2%	60.2%	63.6%	5.2%	9.1%	2.9%	2.0%
Philadelphia	23.2%	23.6%	36.9%	32.8%	43.4%	47.6%	12.3%	13.4%	6.3%	1.3%
Washington, DC	51.2%	46.5%	34.8%	26.8%	50.7%	57.3%	9.1%	9.3%	3.5%	2.1%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, State and County QuickFacts, 2013.

Technical Appendix C

HOW THE CITIES' POLICY INVESTMENTS WERE RATED

We conducted an independent review of policy investments that support parent choice in three areas: information, enrollment, and transportation. The review included searches for information on district websites, local education nonprofits, and other agencies that are involved in overseeing or supporting parent choice in the sample cities.

Information: Information systems were rated based on seven attributes: information available on all schools, data available on school performance, information available on the enrollment process, filtering mechanisms provided, materials provided online, information on curricular programming, and materials provided in print. Information systems that did not cover all publicly funded schools could only receive half the points possible for each attribute (3.5 total). Little investment = less than 4 points; moderate investment = 4 to 5 points; significant investment = 6 to 7 points.

Enrollment: Enrollment systems were evaluated based on the degree of coordination across and within charter and district sectors. Little investment = no common timelines with charter sector and/or decentralized enrollment for district schools of choice; moderate investment = common timelines within charter and district sectors; significant investment = common enrollment system, parents apply via single application.

Transportation: Transportation systems were evaluated based on the availability of free and convenient transportation to schools of choice. Little investment = transportation not provided to most schools of choice; moderate investment = subsidized public transit available to most schools of choice; significant investment = yellow bus transportation provided to most schools of choice.