

ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: INVESTIGATING THE REASONS MIDDLE CLASS AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES IN A LARGE SUBURBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT OPT OUT OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Rotunda Floyd-Cooper, Doctor of Education, 2017

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School choice is widely studied in educational literature. The primary focus of this literature, however, is centered on the choices that families of minority students from low socioeconomic status make to attend charter schools or that of affluent white families choosing competitive private and parochial schools. The dearth of research on middle class and affluent African American families' choice of alternatives to their neighborhood public schools is the focus of this dissertation. Through this dissertation, I explore the indicators informing their choice of private schools as alternatives to their neighborhood schools as well as the influences of social networks on both their decision to opt out of the public schools and the choice of specific private schools both outside and inside their respective communities.

INVESTIGATING THE REASONS MIDDLE CLASS AFRICAN AMERICAN
FAMILIES IN A LARGE SUBURBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT OPT OUT OF THE
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by

Rotunda Floyd-Cooper

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Dedication

To my mother and father, Mrs. & Mrs. Elmer Floyd, thank you for giving me the spirit and will to desire greatness in every area of my life. To the most supportive husband, Reed Cooper, who both encouraged me and loved me every step of the journey; words could never convey the appreciation, admiration and love I have for your support throughout this journey. To my most eager and bright eyed son, Reed Ellis “Aiden” Cooper, mommy knows that she has been somewhat absent throughout this journey, but I promise, from 7 to 70, I will be right here cheering you on. I hope that you are inspired by my efforts for it is all for you.

I can't thank enough every friend that encouraged me: Selecia (Thanks for pushing me), Desann (My sissy- thank for loving me), Andrea (Thank you for mentoring me), my Avers (Thank you for the FOCUS-FOCUS-FOCUS) Dr. Sims (Thank you - you inspire me daily) and every family member, friend, and colleague that inspired, encouraged me every along this journey. #readyforRaleigh

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This study focuses on a large suburban school district in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The district is the second largest school district in the region. As of fall 2015, 123,833 students were enrolled in this system. However, over the last 10 years, the district has experienced fluctuation in enrollment. Since 2005 the enrollment has dropped from 136,095 students to 121,723 (The District, 2014). To collect more evidence surrounding the issue of attrition, the school system engaged in an internal study to learn more both about the profile of children and families that choose not to enroll and of those that withdraw prior to their children's anticipated graduation. The study indicated that, over the past decade, there has been a trend of selective attrition in enrollment and residential mobility, this means that families are enrolling their children in non-public schools or leaving the county and ultimately the school district (the District, 2014). Specifically, the study reported that between 44% and 48% of students who had been enrolled in grade 3 left the system before their expected 12th grade years in 2012, 2013, and 2014. In addition, "About one- third of students who were enrolled in 3rd grade between SY2003 and SY2007 left the school district before their expected graduation year (i.e., SY2012, SY2013, SY2014) or by SY2014 for those expected to graduate in SY2015 and SY2016 (between 32 and 39 percent)" (The District, 2014, p. 5). Figure 1 indicates that the attrition of students enrolled in 3rd grade between school years 2004-2007 did decrease by 7%. Nonetheless, the number of students leaving the school system remains large.

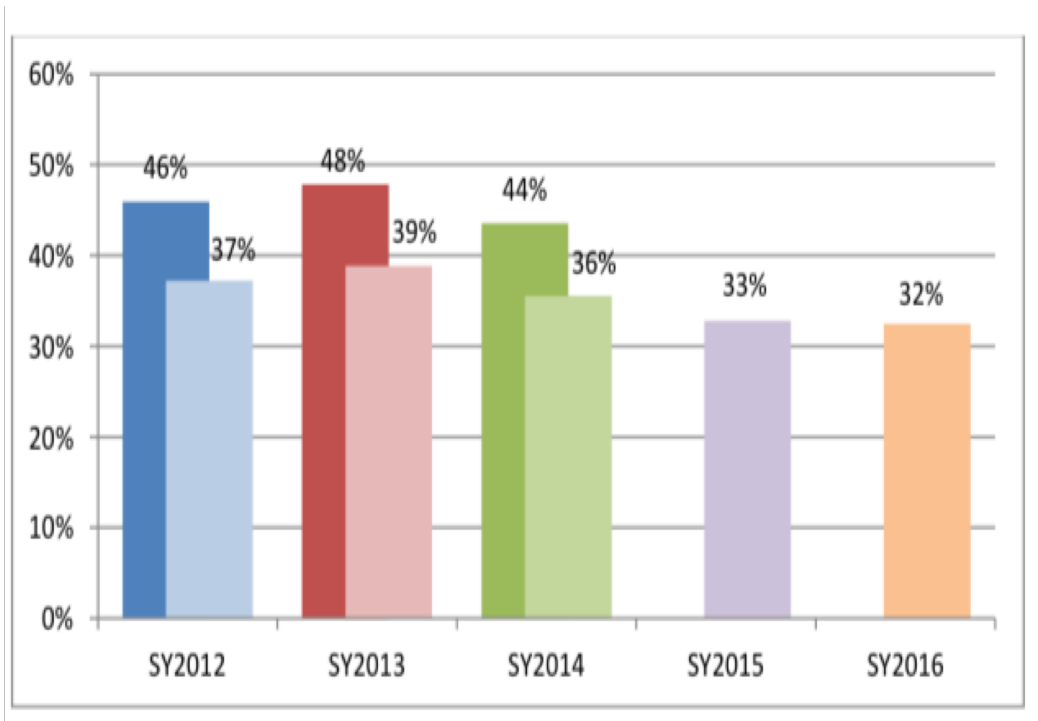


Figure 1. Cumulative attrition rates for SY 2012-SY2016 graduation cohorts (the District, 2014, p. vi). The dark shaded bars indicate attrition before 12th grade year while the light shaded bars indicated attrition by 10th grade.

When asked to give the reason for withdrawing their child from the system, 35% of the families cited “other educational opportunities” (The District, 2014, p. 32). These opportunities included the choice to pursue educational options in a private school setting, both within the District and in other neighboring local education agencies (LEAs) as well as homeschooling. This, however, does not include the choice of charter schools as these are not considered exits from the District. Further, 70% of the families that were in the sample lived in northern area of the District, a region of the county as well as the US with the highest percentage of affluent African American families (United States Census Bureau, 2015). While the report does not indicate what proportion of these families left the county, the loss of middle class and upper middle class students poses a major challenge to a school system

where more than 60% of the students receive free and reduced meals and are from families with a low-socio economic status (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

Enrollment Declines in Urban Districts and the Implications

The District is like many urban school systems experiencing declines in enrollment. In the United States, many Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) depend heavily on state financial contributions as part of their operating budgets and ultimately those funds are linked to student enrollment. Therefore, the loss of student enrollment can have a devastating impact on school resources available. This has become a growing issue in some urban school districts. For instance, various data have shown more than a 10% decrease in overall enrollment over the last decade in LEAs serving urban communities like Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) (Maryland State Data Center, 2014), Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) (Education Data Partnership, 2015), and Chicago City Schools (CCS) (Chicago Public Media, 2014). These are districts where the declines in enrollment are linked not only to economics but also academics as each of these districts has been challenged by the low performance of their diverse student populations. In BCPS, LAUSD, and CCS, there is a relationship between the median income and student achievement. Each of these districts has been cited for their poor performance and each has a median income below their respective state and, in some cases, national average. In LAUSD, where the median income is \$57,751, in CCS, where the median income is \$47,270, and in BCPS, where the median income is \$41,385 parents are leaving traditional public schools for either private or charter school options (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2014).

The District, an urban-suburban school district outside of the Baltimore-Washington, DC corridor, has a majority- minority student population. Yet, from a socio-economic

standpoint the system differs from other urban districts as its jurisdiction has a median income of \$73,447, which far exceeds that of the median national household income of \$50,100 and is significantly close to the state median income of \$73,971; the highest of all states in the country (United States Census Bureau, 2015). This district, however, is experiencing many of the same challenges with both performance and declining enrollments of many urban districts with similar demographics. Though significant research exists suggesting that there is a strong relationship between parental income and the academic performance of students (Reardon, 2011), this trend is not reflected in the District. Despite a median household income that far exceeds the national average, students enrolled in these schools are not experiencing high levels of academic achievement. Since as far back as 2003, the District's students have performed below the state averages on assessments in Reading, Mathematics, and Science. Although the system has seen improved performance in recent years, in 2014 it was ranked 23rd among the state's 24 school districts.

The implications of losing its middle and upper middle income students is a looming concern for the District's Executive, the County Council and the school district's leadership including the Chief Executive Officer. The county leadership views the performance of the schools as a major factor in enhancing the economic development within the county, and the greatest concerns are linked to the potential for residential mobility. According to an article in the Washington Post, the consistent inability to improve the performance of students across the district, coupled with a lack of consistent instructional leadership in the form of a superintendent, has forced families to enact their own strategy for ensuring that their students have access to better educational opportunities that may include moving away from the county entirely (Wiggins, 2013, May 26).

According to Howell and Peterson (2006), student attrition in urban school settings is growing as students and their families assess the risks of remaining in these schools. Though some risk factors include issues such as poverty; homelessness; neighborhoods characterized by crime, violence, and drugs; and sociocultural factors such as discrimination and racial and language barriers, the most significant of these is linked to the academic performance of schools. According to the authors, to avoid the risk factors that impact the potential resilience of the mostly minority students served by these schools, parents are often opting for alternatives to their neighborhood schools including charter schools, private schools, non-religious and religious schools, and alternative schools that meet specialized learning needs of some students. Many of these schools all under Title 1, Part A, and receive compensatory education funding and resources

Though the state of Maryland has not adopted school choice programs outside of the charter school option, there are more than 800 private schools in the state. These schools serve more than 140,000 students across the state (Private School Review, 2015). For each of those students, school districts lose approximately \$7,000 per child in state contributions (Maryland Department of Legislative Services, 2016). If a family opts to pay tuition for an out-of-area enrollment in a school district that is perceived as better, the result is thousands of constituent dollars spent outside the local economy. In the District, private schools are a common choice in the county and surrounding areas, and there are a significant number of private schools available to families. More than 80 private schools located within and around the District served some 18,000 Pre-K-12 students in 2014, almost all from within the District (Private School Review, 2015) A significant number of these schools are religiously affiliated (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

Whatever the reason, dips in enrollments in the District dating back to 2005 leave a high percentage of the student population, approximately 70%, being represented by minority students. More than half of these students are eligible for free and reduced meals (FARMS); a common measure of poverty. This high population of students in poverty contributes again to racial and economic segregation; a problem the system faced not long ago (Wiggins, 2013, April 27).

Student Attrition in Maryland.

Maryland and its LEAs report an “annual withdrawal rate” which is defined as the number and percentage of students withdrawing (via transfers and terminations) for any reason during the September to June school year and after the first day of school (Maryland State Department of Education, 2015). In 2015, the state reported a K-12 withdrawal rate averaging about 8% statewide compared to the District which reported a rate of 15% (Maryland State Department of Education, 2015). Maryland as a state is consistently at the top of national rating scales for achievement and quality of schools with an average mobility rate of approximately 18% for students in grades K-12 (see figures 2 and 3).

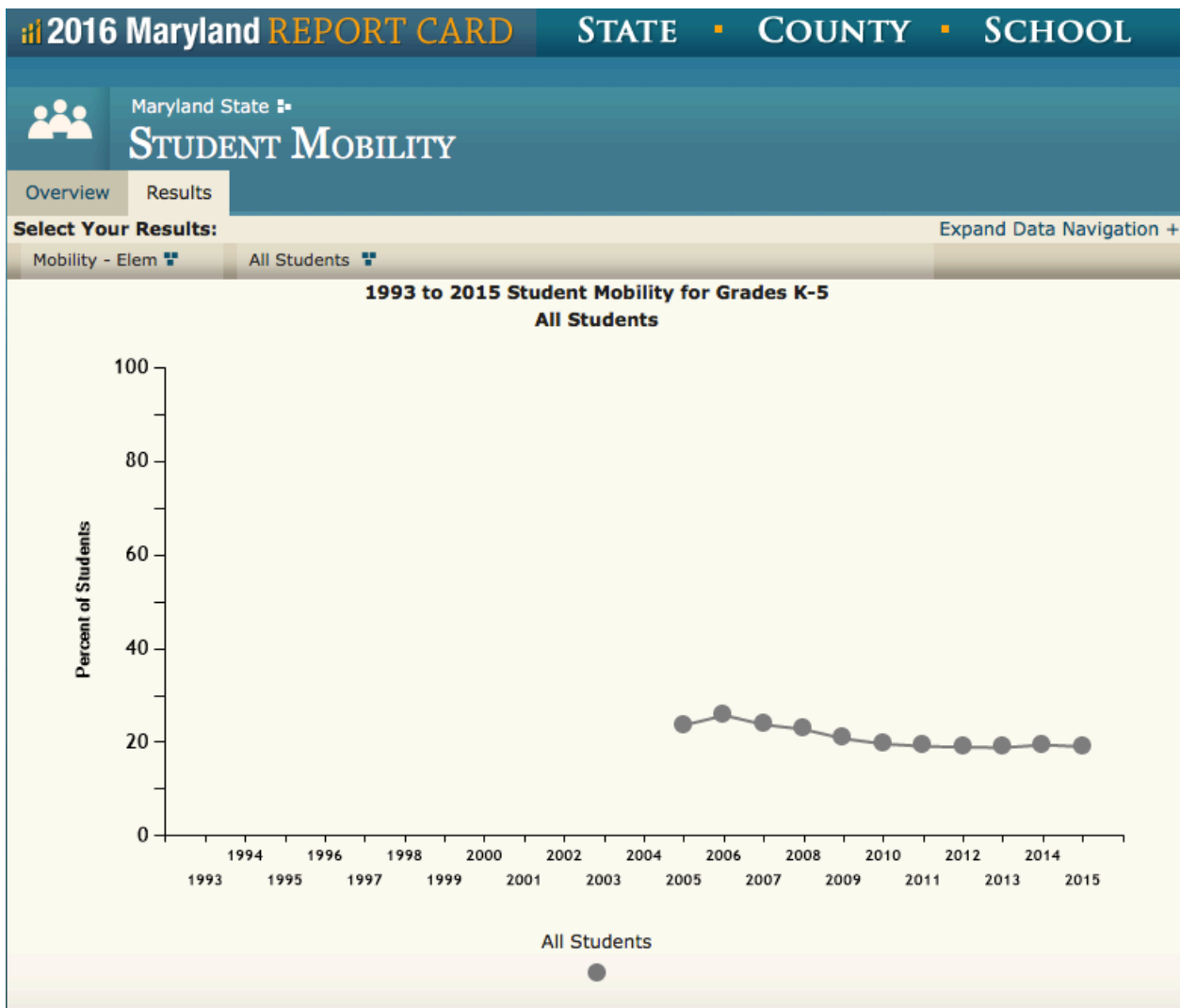


Figure 2. Maryland K-5 Mobility; 10 year Trends (Withdrawals). Adapted from the Maryland Department of Education Report Card, 2016.

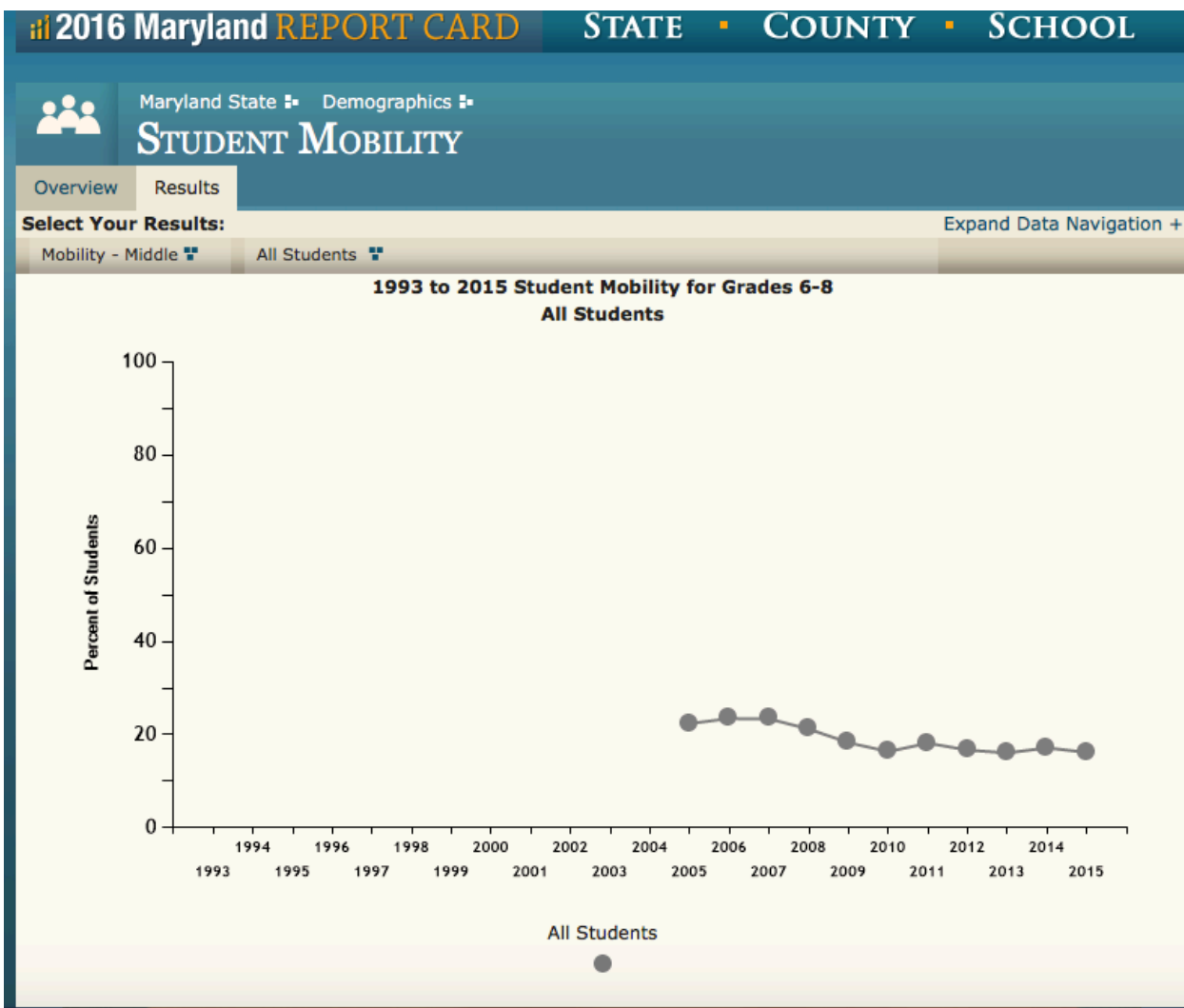


Figure 3. Grades 6-8 Maryland Mobility; 10 year Trends (Withdrawals). Adapted from the Maryland State Department of Education Report Card, 2016.

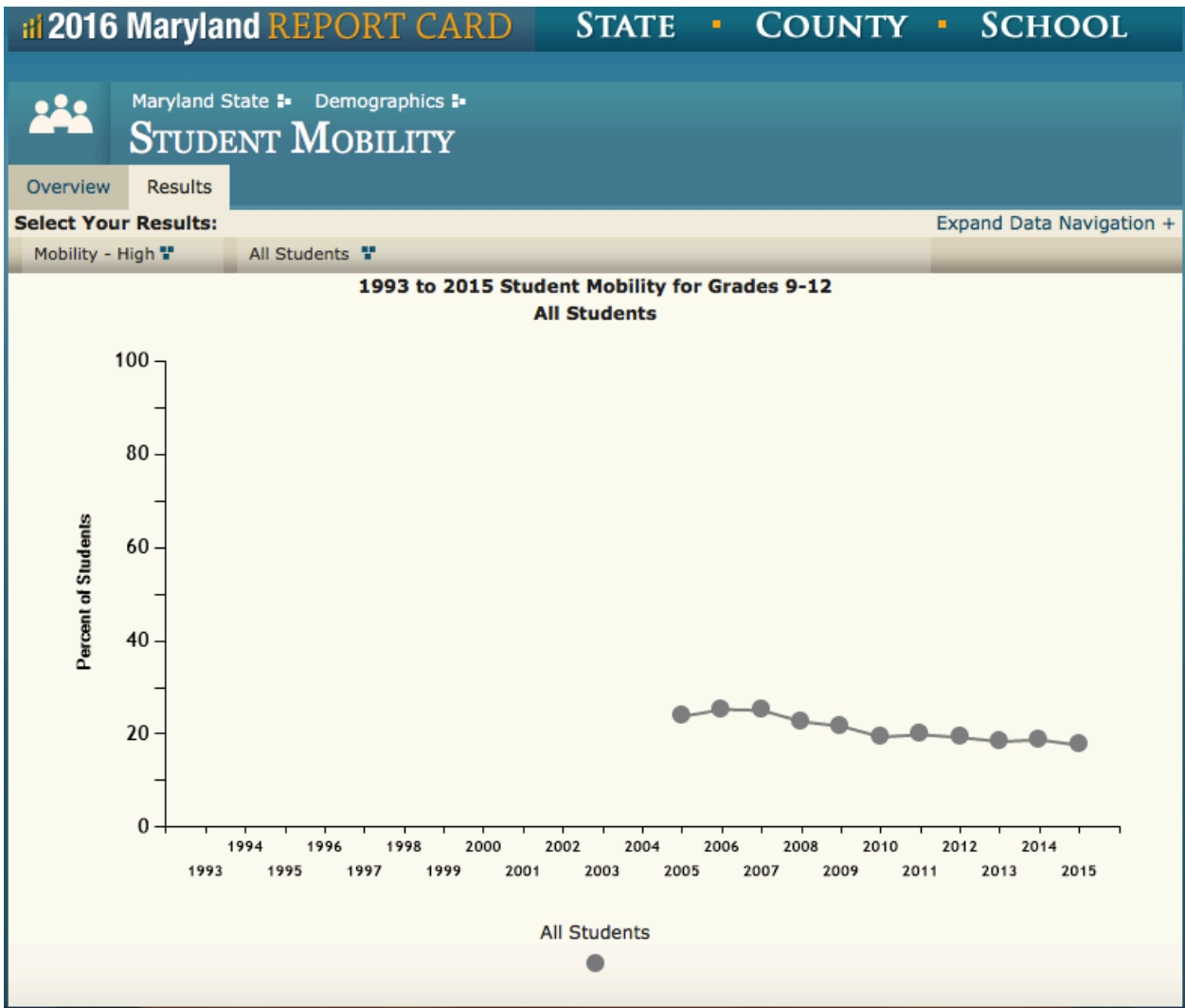


Figure 4. Grades 9-12 Maryland Mobility; 10 year Trends. Adapted from the Maryland State Department of Education Report Card, 2016.

Efforts to Address Declining Enrollment in the District

The District has created several initiatives over the last decade to address declining enrollments. These include increasing public school options such as charter schools and other specialty programs and engaging in a major overhaul of its governance and administrative systems.

Charter schools.

The county elected to engage in the charter school movement. A charter school is an independently run public school granted greater flexibility in its operations in return for greater accountability for performance. The *charter* establishing each school is a performance contract detailing the school's mission, program, students served, performance goals, and methods of assessment. These are independent public schools that are allowed flexibility to engage with unique and innovative instructional strategies while still being held accountable for improved student achievement (National Education Association, 2015).

Unlike many of the private schools within the District, these schools are public schools of choice with no religious affiliation. In the District, charter schools are publicly-funded and open by lottery to all students with no requirements for admission testing or screening. The system authorizes or charters these independent schools through a contract which details the specific programmatic offerings of the school along with goals and associated performance expectations. These charters also outline how student performance will be assessed. While the charter schools in the District are required to participate in all summative assessment administrations, for example, in Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), they are not required to engage in all formative assessments that traditional the District schools are expected to utilize; primarily because the charter network has outlined some of its own expectations for monitoring progress in performance.

The EXCEL Charter School and Turning Point Charter Schools were introduced to the District in 2005-2006. Since then, the school district has moved to full operation of ten charter schools serving more than four thousand students. The attraction of these schools comes because of the autonomy given in exchange for increased levels of accountability to a variety of stakeholders who often include an executive board, families who send children there, the

community of taxpayers that fund the school, as well as the authorizers of the charter (The District, 2009).

Specialty programs.

In addition to the introduction of charter schools, the District has also increased the access and offerings of specialty programs such as language immersion programs, dual language programs at two elementary schools, performing and visual arts program academies. Many of these programs are considered magnet programs, drawing enrollment from beyond the traditional school boundaries (Magnet Schools of America, n.d.). Magnet schools were first introduced within the District in 1985 to desegregate the school system. However, according to a press release by the District, by 2006 most of these programs were eliminated because the expenses associated with operating were no longer sustainable (The District, 2009).

Additionally, many of these schools were underperforming. Those magnet schools that were identified as successful based on constituent interest and greater academic success were replicated in or relocated to other regions of the district which had become predominately African American. Despite the District's best efforts to leverage the positive momentum associated with some of the long standing successful magnet programs like the District's Language Immersion school and the District's Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Program, the overall enrollment in the District was still on the decline.

Governance change.

In 2008, amid a fiscal crisis and enrollment declines, the then Interim Superintendent, collaborated with community stakeholders to derive a plan for further consolidation of schools and expansion of specialty programs (The District, 2009). Four years later amid scandal,

attempts to recover from a failed economy, and a cycle of mistrust from the community linked to continued declines in academic success, the governance of the school system was moved from the Board of Education to the County Executive. This new governance policy allowed the county council to have authority over both the selection of and the supervision of the school system's new Chief Executive Officer or Superintendent (Prince George's County Government, 2013).

After years of inconsistency in leadership in the District, the County Executive's selection of the new Chief Executive Officer, formerly a superintendent in a neighboring county, was a strategic attempt to regain public confidence in the school system after four years of leadership that resulted in the departure of a superintendent receiving a vote of "no confidence" (Baltimore Examiner, 2012). The selection of the current superintendent in 2013 was marked by commitments to move the metaphorical "performance needle" significantly, making the district schools more competitive and perceivably "world-class". The new superintendent convened a diverse group of stakeholders to hear concerns and develop a significant transition plan that would mark the beginning a "journey to greatness" as cited in the CEO's Transition Plan (Wiggins, 2013, August 20). The transition plan led to a strategic plan which committed to a systemic focus on academic excellence, expansion of specialty programs, a focus on literacy, and a commitment to greater coherence and transparency in the work of the school system.

A new strategy for improving the District.

Staunchly supported by the county executive, the CEO's inaugural year was filled with unquestioned adjustments, elimination of positions, organizational restructuring, and preliminary funding of programs to support the vision of this new leader who had

demonstrated his potential impact and commitment after having led a neighboring and significantly higher performing district for 7 years. Armed with an equally talented executive leadership team, including a deputy superintendent with skill and expertise in school improvement, the District would make its best effort to fulfill its *Promise of 2020* by implementing a variety of strategies. Having developed the first strategic plan in more than a decade, the Chief Executive Officer convened a diverse stakeholder group to identify areas of priority linked to attaining the system's goal of becoming "Great by Choice" (The District, 2014). Because of a variety of focus groups and synthesis of the feedback garnered from these stakeholders, system leaders collaborated with Harvard University to develop the District Coherence Framework borrowing from the Harvard University's Public Education Leadership Project (PELP).

PELP was designed to help leaders within school systems to consistently and critically consider the interdependence between the organizational elements of the system. The organizational elements include the systems, structures, culture, stakeholders, and resources. Further, the framework (See Figure 5) is intended to support leaders with an understanding of how each of these elements, both independently and collaboratively, play a critical role in the implementation of any improvement strategy (Harvard University , 2003).

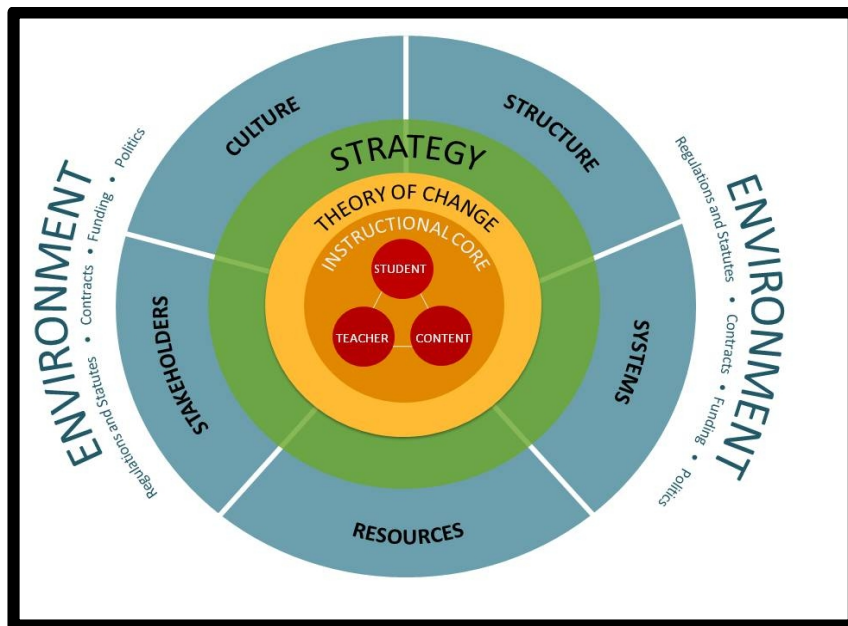


Figure 5. PELP Coherence Framework. Adapted from the Harvard University, Public Education Leadership Project

The Data Wise Improvement Process.

The District leadership determined that it would leverage the Data Wise Improvement Process to begin its strategic effort to transform the school system (The District, 2014). Data Wise is an educational program developed at Harvard University that is designed to enhance the capacity of school teams to use data *collaboratively* to enhance instructional practice that yields marked results. A significant emphasis is placed on the ability of teams to prepare and engage in active inquiry prior to creating action plans linked to improvement data. It is believed that this strategic focus on building a culture of collaboration where teams use structured protocols for engagement with data leads to more careful and deliberate reflection, intentional collaboration, and greater focus on collection of evidence from instruction (Boudett & Rease, 2014).

The system first introduced the Data Wise Improvement Process in 2010 by way of funding received through the Race to the Top (RTTT) grant. A group of designated priority

schools (20) were targeted to engage with Data Wise through structured professional development from Harvard staff and a designated consultant. These schools engaged with this process for two years chronicling their progress through a Data Wise Journey Process whereby teams collect evidence of work that has been done toward improvement. Seeing the great potential for the work of implementation of the Data Wise Improvement to have a significant impact on not just performance, but also the culture of the organization, this work was scaled up during fall of 2014 to include all 205 schools in the District. Schools would be offered targeted support with implementation of this new improvement process by way of a newly developed Office of Continuous Systemic Improvement. Staffed with an Executive Director and nine instructional specialists, the work of this team would be to support schools and departments with successful implementation of this process aimed at improving culture and performance throughout the system. The use of this process is a critical tool in the quest for improvement within this school district.

While the use of data to support improvement of schools is not uncommon, the District implemented the Data Wise Improvement Process as a strategy to impact not only schools but also every department within the school system. The aim was to revolutionize the use of Data Wise as it was traditionally used and to address years of challenges within departments in the district like transportation, capital improvement programs, human resources, and building services that had also be on the list of reasons that parents opted out of the District.

The District Coherence Framework (See Figure 5) was intended to serve as a visual resource that all stakeholders within any area of responsibility could use to consider themselves and their work as a lever that positively impacts the instructional core (The

District, 2015). The Coherence Framework challenged all employees to consider the question: “What *culture* is essential [within my department] to have the most positive impact on the instructional core?” This question could be utilized with any of the organizational elements from the coherence framework as a starting point for improvement. Additionally, the systems theory of change states “if we focus on culture, performance, and data with a lens on literacy, we can have outstanding academic achievement for all students.” (The District, 2015) This emphasis on culture as a primary driver for the work of improvement was part of the motivation for use of the Data Wise Improvement Process as the primary work of this process promotes transparent reflection about culture in a way that many improvement processes do not (Boudett & Rease, 2014).

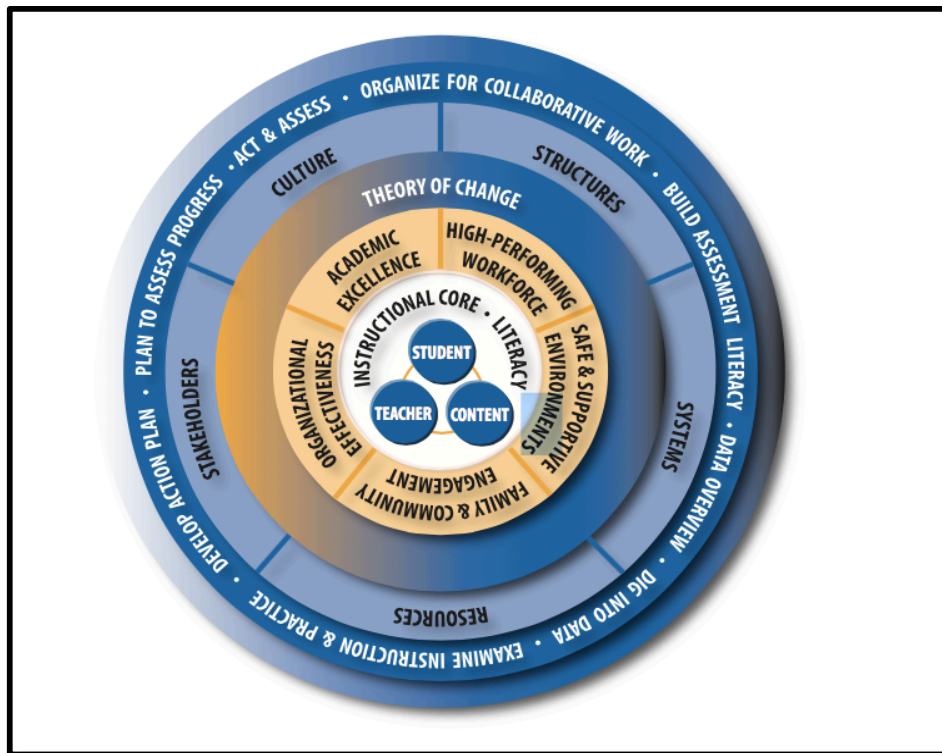


Figure 6. The District Coherence Framework, a visual to assist leaders within the District with understanding the relationship and interdependence of aspects of the district and the relationship to the improvement strategy.

Even with the new school governance process and the increased level of accountability of the public schools to its taxpaying constituents, continued declines in enrollment could potentially lead to decreases in funding and increased lack of confidence in the schools among the taxpayers and the County Council. Yet, with 60% of the District Council's budget being directed to the school system, the system's demonstrated ability to improve the overall quality of programs and increase achievement of its more than 120,000 students continues to be limited as evidenced by its ranking as compared to other LEAs (Hambrick, 2015). In a school district where most of the parent population's demographic is well educated, and in many cases earning middle-class incomes or greater, quality schools - as defined by academic achievement and a culture of continuous improvement - are important. If middle and upper middle income families do not perceive the schools as good and building a record of improving academic achievement, families will continue to be motivated to consider other educational opportunities like private schools or even relocation.

Literature Review

The literature review examined some factors associated with school choice. First, I defined and provided a brief overview of my definition of school choice; then I described which parents choose to exercise school choice and what factors motivate them. I then addressed the role of parents' perceptions of a school's culture in school choice.

School Choice

Public school choice is a term used to describe a wide range of program offerings students and their families can leverage as alternatives to public schools (Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, 2015). This may include other public and private schools accessible via voucher programs as well as charter schools and magnet schools. In addition, parents may choose to place their children in private tuition based schools at their expense. Although these can be very different types of choices or options, I define school choice not in terms of the type of option, but the act of a parent choosing to enroll their child in a school other than the assigned public school. Affording parents, the right to choose their child's school ensures that families have the flexibility to choose a school that can cater to and adjust to a child's specialized needs whether social or academic. Chubb and Moe (1988) argue that private schools and other schools of choice are more responsive to the individual needs of students. This move to allow parents to choose would force public schools to retreat from the bureaucratic and highly political focus on what are often conflicting issues. While there are several approaches to choose, including use of vouchers, charter schools and choice of private schools, the common aim is to increase the range of options and quality of education for a child beyond those found in their neighborhood school (Loeb, Valant, & Kasman, 2011).

Why Parents Exercise School Choice

The literature indicates that there can be multiple reasons for parents to choose to move their child from his or her traditional assigned public school. Bossetti (2004) argues that parents operate around the idea of choosing schools from a single perspective by what is referred to as rationale choice theory. Rationale choice theory asserts that parents engage in decision making about what schools their child will attend from a place grounded in their values and best interest of their children. Ideally, parents want more rather than less of the best for their children. According to Chubb and Moe (1990), the decision to choose a school is also informed by a parent's sense of empowerment, involvement, sense of community, and perception of student achievement.

Jacobs (2011) states that every parent visualizes an ideal school setting to which they can confidently send their child. This school likely meets multiple parental preferences. He states that the selection of a specific school in any multi-school system implies that the school of choice must be closest to that parent's ideal point than any other school in the system. These opportunities to achieve the ideals may be increased or lessened depending on critical factors such as Socio-Economic Status (SES) and access to information about the variety of school options. In general, research on enrollments in charter and private schools suggests that middle to upper income parents tend to exercise choice more than lower income families (Goldring & Phillips, 2008). Bomotti (1996) found that parents who chose to enroll their child in an alternative (magnet or specialty) school tended to be better versed in educational issues and more involved with their children.

Factors in parental choice.

Various studies have examined the reasons that parents may opt out of their neighborhood public schools. Goldring and Phillips (2008) surveyed parents in a large suburban district who opted to send their children to private school instead of their respective zone public school. They found that the reasons parents had for choosing a school other than their zoned or assigned neighborhood school varied. The reasons included seeking better academic programs, overall parental dissatisfaction, safety, and in some cases, demographics. In this study, minority and low SES parents often did not identify racial diversity or values as priorities whereas college-educated parents cited these as important considerations when they chose schools for their children. Weiher and Tedin (2002) surveyed more than 1000 racially and ethnically diverse families on preferences that defined their choice of charter schools. These families, representing White, Black and Hispanic families, reported that they were seeking schools that were of high academic quality. Despite academic quality being a top priority among each of these groups, their final choice in charter school for each of the groups ultimately reflected a student population that represents their own racial or ethnic group by 10-15 percent more than the school they left. This suggests that demographic or race is a factor in their choice.

In another study about the school preferences of minority, low SES families as compared to Anglo and high SES families, both groups of parents noted that high quality teachers, smaller class sizes, and rigorous curriculum were part of their expectations for a quality academic program (Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000). Additionally, when students were surveyed, most identify diversity in academic offerings as a priority preference. When analyzing the degree to which academic quality is important among different

socioeconomic and ethnic groups, Kleitz et al. (2000) concluded that this preference was as important, if not more important to racial minorities and low SES families as compared to other parents.

Jacobs (2011) summarized some of what is known about the preferences of parents in a large urban district choosing charter schools and the rationale for their choice. In his summary of the literature he highlighted the fears that practitioners and parents alike have about the imbalances that charter schools create in racial demographics typically targeting the best performing students. Other researchers cite studies, however, that reflect that the contrary has occurred with disproportionate numbers of minority and at-risk students being served at charter schools (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2011). Research suggests that parents engage in alternative school choices when they feel their neighborhood or traditional public school fails in educating their children to their standard (Jacobs, 2011). Parents sought out schools that they felt had higher academic standards, better curriculum, and better school facilities.

According to Altenhofen, Berends and White (2016), fewer studies have focused on school choice among suburban high-income parents. They note that, like parents from both low socioeconomic status (SES) as well as racially diverse groups, high income suburban parents also cite a desire to provide their children with the highest quality academic programs as the primary reason for choice of private or charter schools. Altenhofen et al. (2016) surveyed predominately White, high-income, suburban families to determine the relative importance of various factors in their school choice decision making process. These parents reported that having access to good teachers and smaller class sizes were priority requirements in choosing alternatives to their local schools. Altenhofen et al. also note that in prior research these same factors were found to be more important to families of low SES.

Conversely, when the results of the survey are examined as compared to the actual behavior exercised by the same parents, there is evidence that parents often do not choose schools with academic performance that exceeds that of the school from which they have departed.

Social networks and social class also play a large role in where parents send their children to school. According to a study conducted by Holme (2002), the status of the families was a dominant factor in the choice of schools and communities among White upper middle to upper income well-educated families. These families tend to select schools and neighborhoods based on the perception that the schools that serve children from similar economic and social backgrounds are superior to those serving the children of lower status parents. Often these neighborhoods and schools have been or are predominately White. In this study, middle class parents acknowledged that the choice to move their children to neighboring public school districts or non-public schools had little, if anything at all, to do with issues related to curriculum and instruction. Fewer than ten percent of the families had even visited the school of choice or the school that had been rejected before transferring their child. Finally, while the tuition for the non-public schools where children in this study were enrolled ranged from \$3000 to \$12,000 annually, Holme concluded that tuition was not a factor in parents' decisions to move their child. Rose (2006) also found that families make decisions relative to school choice primarily based on the perceptions of their social networks and demographics and that the perception is that the schools serving the children of high-status parents were superior to those serving the children of lower-status parents.

Altenhofen, et al. (2016) also cite other studies that suggest that safety and discipline are also priorities as parents make decisions about schools. In a ten-year study of school choice and parent preferences in a large urban district, Stewart and Wolfe (2014) highlight the

relationship between parent criteria for schools and Maslow's hierarchy of needs whereby a safe environment is prioritized ahead of school quality. Though this prioritization may vary by SES, the way families access information about school safety is likely a factor even though data about disciplinary infractions are available both at the state and school level (Rhodes & DeLuca, 2014). Each of these studies suggest, however, that the primary reason for the concerns around safety are linked to parents feeling that safety is an essential foundation to ensure that academics can be a focus in schools.

Summary

In this section, I have cited the declines in enrollment in the District over the last decade as one of the many reasons that executive leadership within the district are committed to improvement efforts. As the system continues to invest in improvement initiatives like the Office of Continuous Systemic Improvement as a support to schools and departments in implementation of the Data Wise Improvement process, stakeholders will continue to demand and expect to see a return on this investment in the form of increased achievement and efficiency and improved customer service. Without this, taxpaying families will continue to seek alternatives to the District which will lead to continued losses in state and federal revenue.

The literature on parent choice suggests that parents leave because their neighborhood schools for a variety of reasons. The primary reason is for better academic quality. Specifically, parents are seeking more diverse academic offerings at the high school level that prepare students for college. At the elementary level, when parents reference academic quality, they are looking at how their school of choice performs on high stakes assessments as compared to surrounding schools. At the middle school level, parents are seeking a

combination of both these in addition to evidence of safety for their children. A focus on safety typically is of greater concern among parents of low SES. Parents also include quality teachers, that is, teachers having extensive experience and credentials, as part of their definition of good academic quality. This is most significant to parents who are middle class and high SES.

The research also suggests that parents seldom mention that racial and ethnic composition of schools is a factor in their decision making, but in examining their choice behavior, families of high SES tend to select schools where their own racial ethnic group and SES is reflected. Low SES families tend to choose schools where their own race and ethnicity are represented at a rate that is approximately 10 percent higher than the school that they have left. Also of relative importance in the research is the distance between home and school particularly for families of low SES. These families prioritize this indicator because of the additional financial cost associated with transportation. Families of high SES rarely take this into consideration.

There is not much research examining non-White middle and upper middle class families who choose to send their children to charter schools or non-public schools. The District is a unique community in which to study this group of parents. As noted earlier, the county has a significant African American population (more than 60 percent), and differs from many other districts with many African American families because of its median income of \$73,447 which far exceeds that of the median national household income of \$50,100 and is significantly close to the state median income of \$73,971; the highest of all states in the country (United States Census Bureau, 2015). While the Census Bureau does not have a definition of middle class, but according to Williams (2014), the middle class can be defined

as those households making up to 50% above and up to 50% below the median. According to the US Census data, the median household income in 2015 was \$56,516 (United States Census Bureau, 2016) which would mean the average middle class annual income is \$28,258 to \$84,774. Maryland, had the 3rd highest median household income of \$73, 594 (Kaiser Family Foundation , n.d.), and the District has a median income above the state and at the high end of the US median. Given its demographics, I believe that investigating why the more affluent African American suburban families choose to leave the District's schools is important to determine to what extent these parents share the same reasons as White middle and upper middle class parents as well as racially diverse urban parents.

Purpose.

There is a dearth of knowledge within contemporary academic literature regarding factors influencing school-choice decisions for communities of color, particularly African American families. As reflected earlier in this section, many studies conducted in this area focus on values and priorities for White families, and when issues of race have been introduced, the research context primarily centers on socioeconomic disparities and poverty. Absent in much of the literature is a careful examination of viewpoints, attitudes, and values for middle-class and even affluent African American families. This assertion can even be made for other communities of color. This study seeks to fill this gap in the literature.

This study, consequently, is designed to provide empirical findings about school-choice factors for a sample of African Americans with ample financial resources and appropriate access to varied educational programs. More directly, the study incorporates a sample of middle-class families from a reasonably affluent suburban school district in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. In addition, the research seeks to explicate the

influences of social networks within African American communities on the school-choice process.

Through this research, I examined the indicators for selection of alternatives to this large urban school district among middle class African American families who have left the school district or those with children approaching school age and considering not enrolling.

Additionally, I hope to understand more about the influence of social networks on the choice.

Using qualitative methods, the study attempted to address the following research questions:

1. What are the salient concerns of middle-class African American parents that have prompted them to enroll their children in non-public schools?
2. Are there unique influences of curriculum and instruction; safety and discipline; and management and infrastructure that weigh into school-choice decisions for middle-class African American parents?
3. Are there unique influences of familial and social networks that weigh into school-choice decisions for middle-class African American parents?

Section 2: Investigation

The purpose of my proposed study was to explore the reasons why middle to upper middle class African American families residing in one large suburban county choose to send their children to non-public schools. I addressed the following research questions with qualitative analysis of interview data from a purposive sample of socio-economically-advantaged, middle class African American families:

1. What are the salient concerns of middle-class African American parents that have prompted them to enroll their children in non-public schools?
2. Are there unique influences of curriculum and instruction; safety and discipline; and management and infrastructure that weigh into school-choice decisions for middle-class African American parents?
3. Are there unique influences of familial and social networks that weigh into school-choice decisions for middle-class African American parents?

In the following sections I describe my study design and the methods I used to address these questions.

Study Design

I used qualitative methodology for my study. Creswell (2007) notes that qualitative methods are best suited to address research questions where the focus is obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of populations. Additionally, qualitative methods are also effective in identifying imperceptible factors such as social norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity, and religion, whose role in the research issues may not be clear (Qualitative Research Consultants Association, 2017).

Specifically, I used a grounded theory approach to analyze the data collected from interviews using inductive reasoning to converge upon a theory about what are priority considerations for middle to upper middle class African American families in this school

district. The use of grounded theory as the research methodology allowed the development of hypotheses about these priority indicators based on conceptual ideas that emerge (Creswell, 2007). While there is much research that exists about the factors influencing school choice for many populations, including affluent predominately white families, as well as students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, there appears to be a scarcity of research available related to factors that influence school choice for upper middle class African American families.

Participants.

A non-probabilistic sampling design was used in this study, with the unit of analysis defined as a *family* consisting of, at least, one parent and one school-age child. Consistent with the research questions targeted cases for this study were African American families residing in a geographic location where median annual incomes were at or above the national level for *middle-class*. Data collection procedures included the use of face-to-face interviews for obtaining attitudinal measures pertaining to school-choice and factors influencing the enrollment of children in public schools versus non-public schools. Given these requirements, a purposive sample of 15 middle-class African American families were included in this qualitative study.

The interview schedule (i.e., protocol) for this study contained no specific questions pertaining to demographics, but rather an open-ended question was asked at the beginning of each interview session about family background. Responses offered by the interviewees were recorded and documented with other substantive data gathered from the sessions. Several characteristics were gleaned from these open-ended responses provided by the participants in the research sample.

The participants for this study were drawn from 5 private or parochial schools located either within *the District*, or within a 20-mile radius of the District's central office, that serve students in grades Pre-K-12. This sample was limited to parents living in the District and who had at least one child in grades Pre-K-12 enrolled in one of these non-public schools. The schools chosen were either within the District or within a 20-mile radius of the District. These schools were identified because their target enrollment were students residing in the District.

A total of 15 African American parents (either father or mother) who met the criteria above were selected for the study. Purposive and snowball sampling was used in a two-stage process to identify the participants. To obtain participants, I first contacted the head of school via telephone at each of the five schools and explained the purpose of my study and asked each person to identify three parents who meet the criteria below.

Three parents were recruited from each of the schools representing both religious and non-religious affiliations:

- School A: A Christian school located in a small southern suburb in a Mid-Atlantic state within the District serving students in grades Pre-K -12 with enrollment of 900 plus students
- School B: A Christian school located in small southern suburb in a Mid-Atlantic state within the District serving students in grades Pre-K-12 with enrollment of 367 students
- School C: Pre-K-8 catholic school located in small suburb in a Mid-Atlantic state in the central region of the District serving 648 students
- School D: Pre-K-12 private school located in a southern, rural/suburban region of a Mid-Atlantic state serving 403 students

- School E: Pre-K-12 private school located in a city less than 20 miles from the District serving 650 students

The majority of the families included in the research sample included children residing with two parents; with 13 of the 15 cases being married and living in a single-family home. Two cases consisted of a divorced head-of-household, yet the estranged parents were fully active in school-choice and other family decisions. It is estimated that the age range of parents within the sample was 35 to 45 years. Specifically, ten parents in the sample were in that age range, with the remaining five cases including parents above 45 years of age.

Regarding family size, eight of the cases included had two children. Three of the participants had three children, and three cases had only one child. For one case in the sample, the family size consisted of five children. In total, the sample included the parents of 28 children. Most interviewees indicated that their children were of elementary school age. That is, 17 children were in elementary school with five with children in middle-school and six cases with children enrolled in high school. The remaining two did not identify the grade of their children.

Relative to the types of schools selected by the families in the study, nine of the cases enrolled their children in non-public schools only, while the other six cases enrolled their children in both public and non-public school. However, it is important to note that each sampled family had at least one child enrolled in a non-public school during the timeframe when this study was being conducted.

Upon approval from the University of Maryland's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I made email contact with colleagues who serve in instructional leadership roles, including Heads of School, Director of Admissions, and Admissions Liaison, in each of these schools

informing them of the study and its purpose and requesting the names of three parents, who were African-American residents of the District, having at least one child enrolled in the school (See Appendix A). I asked each of the leaders to deliver an invitation letter via email or in person (See Appendix B). The letter asked parents to contact me if they were willing to participate in the study. From this process, I recruited 15 parents. For any school that had fewer than three parents who expressed interest, I would ask for suggestions of other parents who might be willing to participate. In the cases when this occurred, those parents also received an invitation letter requesting their participation.

Through this process, I intended to identify 18 to 20 parents; that is, three parents from 6 schools instead of the resulting three parents from the 5 schools who ultimately participated.

Table A indicates the number of parents from each school and how many were recruited through the principal and how many through other parents. I sent 18 parents a Google document to confirm interest and to submit name, name of the private or parochial school that their child(ren) attend, and preferred date and time for the interview (See Appendix C).

Table 1

Number of Parents Recruited by School

School	Number of Parents recruited	Number of participating parents
School A	3	3
School B	4	3
School C	5	3

School D	3	3
School E	3	3
School F*	0	0
School G*	3	0

Once the 18 potential participants completed the Google questionnaire, I emailed a brief one page document that provided a brief overview of the purpose of the study and confirmed the date and time that had been set to interview them. The document contained my email address and telephone number so parents could contact me if they wanted further information or had additional clarifying questions. When I was contacted by parents, I addressed their questions and if they were willing, I scheduled a time and place to meet to conduct an interview with them. Depending on the substance of the interviews, for example, when a specific participant responded in a manner that was unexpected, I would ask him/her to recommend another parent who may share the same viewpoint or who could elaborate on a point. Specifically, there were a few instances where parents who were preliminarily identified turned out to not be suitable candidates for the study in that their children graduated from or completed matriculation at the sample school prior to study initiation. This occurred as part of the iterative nature of interviewing and qualitative methodology.

Methods and Procedures.

This study utilized qualitative methods specifically semi-structured face-to-face interviews. According to Patton (2002), interviews “yield in-depth responses about people’s experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge” (p. 176). The interview

questions that were utilized in this study were derived through adaptation of research questions posed by Atelhofen et al. (2016) in their study of high income families and their choice of charter schools. Specifically, the research questions in which their study was grounded were:

- How do parents become interested in charter schools?
- What are the most important reasons why parents apply to charter schools?
- What sources of information do parents use when applying to charter schools?

The Altenhofen et al (2016) study utilized with participants a survey with both open- and closed-ended questions. I used the survey questions to craft semi-structured interview questions that provided flexibility to elicit additional information from parents as needed. Semi-structured interview protocols are used to allow for “the discovery or elaboration of information that is important to participants but may not have previously been thought of as pertinent...” (British Dental Journal, 2008, p. 291). (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2008). The following questions guided the individual interviews:

1. When did you first consider enrolling your child in [name of school] and why?
(Probe for: did you enroll your child in public school and leave, did you always intend to enroll your child in a private school?)
2. If you had to give your top two reasons for not enrolling your child in the District public school, what would they be?
3. Why did you decide on enrolling your child in [name of school]? (Probe for primary motivator of decision to choose this specific school, e.g., religion, social class, geographic location, tuition, family influence, other children went there, etc.)

4. Was [name of school] the only other school you applied to? Did you apply to other non-public schools? Did you apply to the District lottery? (Probe for information about whether parent attempted to enroll in a specialty program)
5. What information or people had the greatest influence on your decision to apply to a non-public school? (Did friends or family influence your decision in any way? If so how? Did information from the school or from the District influence your decision? If so, what was the specific information and how did it influence your decision?)
6. Are there other parents that you know of that may be interested in being interviewed to discuss their preferences related to their perspectives on priority indicators impacting their choice in private schools for their children? (This is an optional question should the direction of the conversation converge toward a topic that is unanticipated or not linked to the research focus.)

The interview's semi-structured protocol focused on gaining the perspectives about the public schools as a viable option for their children's schooling. This structure did permit me to follow up on any unanticipated responses and probe more deeply to clarify meaning.

Conducting the interviews. Berg (2007) defines interviews as “a conversation with a purpose” (p. 89). He also stated that interviews might be an effective data collection method when researchers are “interested in understanding the perceptions of participants or learning how participants come to attach certain meanings to phenomena” (p. 97). I conducted all interviews with individual parents, face-to-face, over a three-week period in the summer of 2017. Interviews were conducted at a location and time that was determined by the

participants. Interviews were scheduled for one hour, and the average interview lasted about 30 to 35 minutes. There was one outlier interview that lasted for more than one hour.

With permission of the participant, I audiotaped each interview. Prior to the interview, I emailed each participant the approved Informed Consent Form (See Appendix D) so that he/she could review the document. At the beginning of the interview I asked each participant to sign the consent form. I made certain that the interviewees understood the purpose of the study and that their interview would be confidential and nothing would be disclosed that will identify them as individuals. I also clarified that participation was completely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw or not answer a specific question. Any participant who decided not to continue participating in the study would have any evidence of his/her participation destroyed. All information related to the research study would be open to full disclosure to ensure nothing was hidden from participants. I agreed to respond to any questions from participants as needed before, during, and after the interview.

I began each of the interviews with an introduction and by thanking them for their time. To put participants at ease, I allowed each person to ask questions to remind himself/herself of the purpose of the research and shared that if at any time, they were not comfortable proceeding, they had the flexibility to discontinue the interview. Participants were also reminded that the recording of their interview would remain confidential and would only be utilized for the research. I also shared that as the parent of a school-aged child residing in the District, this research would be valuable to parents like me as well as other parents who may be challenged in making similar considerations for their children in the future. If for some reason a parent was uncomfortable with being audiotaped but was still willing to be participate in the interview, I planned to script their responses by using an

outside observer to capture their responses to ensure limited distractions during the interview process.

Field notes. In addition to audio taping of the interviews of each participant, I captured field notes to add more contextual meaning to the data collected in the interviews. I utilized the framework in Appendix E to document notes about observations of the environment and the participant as well as key ideas relative to their responses. The data collected via use of field notes were primarily descriptive or reflective in nature. The types of descriptive evidence captured included the physical setting and how the interviewees interacted in the setting as well as any pertinent direct quotes that may have been important for capture. The reflective data that was collected included impressions about what was observed, unanswered questions that emerged for me as well as personal insights about the observations (University of Southern California, 2017).

Analyses.

According to Creswell (2007), in qualitative research, the analysis and collection of data coincide allowing for comprehensible interpretation. This iterative process occurs in conjunction with the collection and transcribing of the data. According to Hatch (2002):

Data analysis is a systematic search for meaning. It is a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned can be communicated to others. Analysis means organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories. It often involves synthesis, evaluation, interpretation, categorization, hypothesizing, comparison, and pattern finding. It

always involves “mind work” . . . Researchers always engage their own intellectual capacities to make sense of qualitative data. (p. 148)

I utilized *Transcribe*, an online resource used for transcription of interviews. All transcription were done verbatim from these audio files and were converted into text format. To ensure accuracy, I also listened to all audio files while reading the resulting transcriptions. The text transcriptions were filed electronically in folders on my personal laptop and organized by participant. When a participant seemed, reluctant or unwilling to be audiotaped, they were advised that an objective party was available to support with the capturing of field notes. While this was the case in two instances, ultimately, all participants consented to audiotaping. An experienced psychometrician with experience in quantitative analysis was utilized to support a follow up review of coding of transcriptions in the initial stages of analysis to identify any additional trends or connections amongst responses.

I used inductive analyses meaning upon collection, data was “reviewed in its raw form to see what preliminary themes or theories emerge” (Thomas, 2006, pp. 237-246). Prior to coding the data using the technology tools, I generated a “meta-narrative” to develop a coding scheme aligned to the purpose of my research. A priori codes were identified using the interview questions that were used with all participants. For example, throughout the literature on choice among families with a combined salary above the median income for their stat, a priori code that might be leveraged as a *preset* code is academic achievement. As responses from participants were reviewed, I compared the data to the preset classification. Where there was a contrast, a new classification or code would be identified or be considered emergent. All other codes were considered emergent; that is, codes that are “. . . concepts, actions, or

meanings, that evolved from the data and are different from the priori codes.” (Stuckey, 2015, p. 8).

Member checking. Prior to getting too far into the analysis of the data collected from the interviews, I sought to validate the data by engaging in the capturing of feedback from participants. To ensure that the data collected was accurate and to ensure that the perspectives of participants were appropriately captured, I engaged in member checking throughout the interview process. I consistently checked my understanding of the responses of participants by paraphrasing and summarizing for clarification. By allowing the participants to confirm that my interpretation of their responses aligned with their intent when responding, accuracy was enhanced and eliminated some potentially inherent biases due to my role as both the researcher and research analyst (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016).

Ensuring validity. As an African-American mother possessing many of the demographic characteristics of the participants in the research sample, I too have sought out alternatives to the public-school system serving the community in which I live. As such, I am as much a participant of this research study as I am the researcher. I am, however, a professionally certificated educator who is employed by the school district which the participants opted out of. As such, throughout the proposed research study I did acknowledge this and consistently engaged in self-assessment to ensure that I maintained neutrality as I engaged with participants. I consistently reflected to identify any unacknowledged bias in my thinking or in documentation in the data analysis process so that appropriate consideration was given to how these biases might impact the research and to ensure that the potential effects of these biases are minimized. To further enhance validity, I engaged in member-checking by sharing my transcriptions with all participants via email as well as trusted

colleagues with research experience. Participants were invited to review their respective transcripts and provide feedback from their individual interviews. Additionally, a colleague with extensive research experience reviewed both my transcriptions to ensure alignment with both primary and secondary codes.

Confidentiality and Management of Risks

The risks associated with participation in this study were minimal. To protect the identities of the participants, pseudonyms or letters and numbers were used to reference both the participants and their children's school. To further maintain the confidentiality of the participants, all audio recordings and transcriptions were given an alpha-numeric code and the list of names corresponding to the codes were stored in a separate file. All files were maintained on my personal password-protected external hard drive. Any dissemination of the results of this study will not identify any individual parent or school.

Summary

Although the concept of parent choice in education is not a novel idea, this research study provides a potentially unique set of data. Specifically, participants in this study all reside in one of the largest school districts within the United States. Within this district most the families identify as Black or African-American. Additionally, the families in this district and community are extremely diverse in terms of socio-economic status. Thus, this study provides insight into school choice from the perspective of economic variability and not race, which has been most often examined in studies of parent reasons for opting out of public schools.

Section 3: Results, Conclusion, and Implications

Current literature on school-choice is replete with research-related academic outcomes, educational delivery approaches, and instructional practices, and there is an increasing body of literature on parental choice and education. However, there has been limited research conducted on the viewpoints and perceptions of African Americans and other communities of color regarding their options for parental choice. This absence of research is particularly glaring for middle class African American families relative to school choice.

This study attempts to fill that research gap by providing information about factors and the decision-making process that middle-class African American parents use to select a non-public school for their child. Face-to face interviews were conducted with a sample of middle-class African American families selected from a large suburban school district in the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. The goal of this research was to provide insights into the attitudes and values held by these families when making school enrollment decisions for their children. Additional emphasis was placed on the role of social network in the school-choice process in this study.

In this section, results of the interview analyses are presented followed by data analyses for each of the research questions. As described in Section 2, the analyses were conducted following the use of word-based techniques. Specifically, to identify primary themes from the interviews, I reviewed the transcripts and engaged in analysis by looking for word repetitions, key indigenous terms, and key words in context. Upon identification of these primary themes, I moved on to review unmarked texts to “force the search for new and less obtrusive themes” (Ryan & Bernard, 2001). The response patterns were based on responses from the sample that clustered within thematic categories generated from face-to-face interviews. Identified themes

are presented followed by conclusions and implications for the District. Suggestions for future research are also presented.

The response patterns were based on cases from the sample that clustered within thematic categories generated from face-to-face interviews. There were no statistical procedures applied to the data, but rather the analysis focuses on representative responses extracted from interview transcriptions. Response patterns are presented within tables structured in accordance with each of the five interview questions.

Conclusions and implications are included to highlight the importance of key outcomes for the data analyses. These discussions offer insights about the relevance of findings from the study as well as suggestions for future research on this topic area. A final segment within this section addresses implications for the school district where the data were gathered and for other school systems faced with similar enrollment challenges.

As stated in Section 2, the current study focuses on the viewpoints and perspectives of African American families regarding the choice of schools in which their children are enrolled. In review, an interview protocol with 5 questions was used to guide the interviews. I present these results in tables that identify key ideas that emerged from these interviews. These mutually exclusive responses were then linked to priori codes and secondary codes, as appropriate, for each of the interview question as well as the parent interviewees who gave this type of response. In the following sections, I will address each of the study's research questions through analysis of these coded responses.

Analyses for Research Question 1

Research Question 1 focused on identifying the specific variables that influenced parents' decisions to choose the nonpublic school in which their child(ren) were enrolled at the time of the interview. The research question was specifically stated as: What are the salient concerns of middle-class African American parents that have prompted them to enroll their children in non-public schools? Response categories generated from interview questions 1-3 were used to address this research question. The first interview question sought to determine time frame and rationale for families enrolling children in non-public schools. By implication, reasons given for selecting a non-public school highlighted the views and perceptions respondents maintained about not choosing a public school or about not keeping their children in public schools. In particular, upon analysis of responses to all interview questions, there was significant overlap in the responses generated from interview questions 1 and 2 to the responses generated by both questions 3 and 5. More specifically, the choice to enroll in the nonpublic school, whether private or religious was influenced by information parents had obtained about the district or neighborhood school performance, curriculum rigor and academic options, as well the perceptions among other families or conveyed by the media about safety.

Table 2 indicates that 11 response types or categories were identified from the transcripts specific to question 2.

Table 2

Summary of Responses for Interview Question 1 by Interviewees

#	General Themes Emerging from Responses	Parent
1	"... Improved academic offerings in comparison to public schools at secondary level ..."	Parent 01, Parent 08

2	“... Smaller class sizes; more time on task ...”	Parent 01, Parent 15
3	“... Greater emphasis on writing and critical thinking; fewer multiple-choice tests ...”	Parent 01, Parent 09, Parent 12
4	“... Did not intend to enroll child(ren) in non-public schools ...”	Parent 01
5	“... Faith-based decision; always intended to enroll child(ren) in a faith-based school ...”	Parent 02, Parent 06, Parent 13
6	“... Heard negative things about the public schools in the county school district ...”	Parent 03, Parent 13
7	“... Always intended to enroll child(ren) in a private school rather than a public school ...”	Parent 03, Parent 14 Parent 15
8	“... Good recommendations about private schools from family members; only consideration for elementary age child ...”	Parent 04, Parent 05
9	“... Enrolled child(ren) in a private school primarily for daycare purposes ...”	Parent 06, Parent 10
10	“... Did not only consider non-public schools, but selected a private school after birth of child(ren), particularly after doing research ...”	Parent 08, Parent 10 Parent 11, Parent 12, Parent 14
11	“... Selected both public and non-public schools based on the specific needs of each child and financial resources available at the time ...”	Parent 07, Parent 09

As seen in Table 1, most of the responses clustered within response category 10, which is typified by comments such “... did not only consider non-public schools, but selected a private school ... after doing research...”. These responses imply that some of the respondents were not

committed to private and other non-public school options from the onset. Rather, they began to consider nonpublic schools after some other factors came into play. This is aligned with the response theme identified in category #6 and category #8 where respondents discussed recommendations from members of their social networks, e.g., family or media, as having influenced their decision to opt out of the public school. A cluster of responses in category #3, where the viewpoints expressed are typified that [a non-public school was selected because of its] “... greater emphasis on writing and critical thinking, fewer multiple-choice tests...” This suggests that the parents may have been seeking an educational setting that differed uniquely from the public-school setting in specific way- whether real or perceived. The responses also give a sense that parents perceived that there was less opportunity for their child to develop skills that these parents perceived as critical to life success.

Still highlighting the most salient response categories derived from Interview Question 1, a cluster of responses was categorized in #5. In this instance, interviewees expressed their selection of a non-public school as a “... faith-based decision ...” Further, these interviewees suggested that that they “...always intended to enroll child(ren) in a faith-based school ...” For these parents, choice of a school reflected their religious values, something which a public school does not offer. Another group of parents (category #7), also indicated that they, “... always intended to enroll child(ren) in a private school rather than a public school ...” but were not clear that this was a religious decision or some other factor.

Interview questions 2 and 3 focused on the reasons for selecting a specific school and those responses are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Summary of Responses for Interview Questions 2 and 3 (Reasons for Choice) by Interviewees

#	Response Category	Parents
1	“... A better curriculum than the public schools within the county school district ...”	Parent 01, Parent 04, Parent 05, Parent 08, Parent 13, Parent 15
2	“... Smaller class sizes than those within the public schools ...”	Parent 01, Parent 06, Parent 14
3	“... The public schools did not have a faith component within the curriculum ...”	Parent 01, Parent 06, Parent 11
4	“... Did not hear favorable things about public schools in the county; poor test scores and rating for the public schools ...”	Parent 01, Parent 11, Parent 12, Parent 14
5	“... Followed the advice of family members who enrolled their children in non-public schools, primarily faith-based schools ...”	Parent 03
6	“... Concerns about bullying and safety of child(ren); wanted a better school climate and neighborhood to allow for improved academic outcomes ...”	Parent 03, Parent 07, Parent 10, Parent 13, Parent 15
7	“... Insistence of spouse who had attended both public and private schools ...” school rather than a public school ...”	Parent 04
8	“... Greater ‘customer support’ was offered by private schools to address the special needs of child(ren) ...”	Parent 05
9	“... Did not want child(ren) to feel the inappropriate peer pressure often occurring in public schools ...”	Parent 07
10	“... The broad range of academic, social, and cultural available in the private school ...”	Parent 08, Parent 12

11	“... Desired a school that would prove more socially and culturally challenging for child(ren) ...”	Parent 09
12	“... Critical thinking as a curriculum focus ...”	Parent 09
13	“... The school allows for a child’s uniqueness and leverages those qualities for learning success ...”	Parent 01, Parent 09
14	“... Class sizes are smaller than those of the public schools, which results in better instruction ...”	Parent 01, Parent 05
15	“... Desired a faith-based learning environment for the child(ren); public schools could not offer that ...”	Parent 02, Parent 03, Parent 06, Parent 07, Parent 09, Parent 10, Parent 13
16	“... The curriculum seemed more robust and challenging for our child(ren); greater focus on writing ...”	Parent 05, Parent 10
17	“... Tuition was free or reduced because of parent’s status as employee at the school in which child(ren) enrolled; affordability and financial aid ...”	Parent 03, Parent 11, Parent 12
18	“... The school had strong athletic and sports programs, even for children in elementary grades ...”	Parent 08
19	“... ‘Customer support’ offered by the school was ideal for families of special-needs children ...”	Parent 05, Parent 15
20	“... A germ-free environment existed in the school because each classroom had its own bathroom ...”	Parent 10
21	“... The learning environment allowed for greater social and cultural engagement than possible in public schools; exploration and play were encouraged ...”	Parent 02, Parent 03, Parent 04, Parent 14
22	“... Family members influenced the choice of school, particularly those with private school experience ...”	Parent 13

23	“... Tuition was free or reduced because of parent’s status as employee at the school in which child(ren) enrolled; affordability and financial aid ...”	Parent 03, Parent 11, Parent 12
24	“... The location of campus was close to home, making the commute to work convenient ...”	Parent 07, Parent 10, Parent 11
25	“... The school had strong athletic and sports programs, even for children in elementary grades ...”	Parent 08
26	“... ‘Customer support’ offered by the school was ideal for families of special-needs children ...”	Parent 05, Parent 15

Table 3 reflects the category of responses to the second and third interview questions which sought to provide insight into the reasons these families chose a non-public school. The highest cluster of responses for Interview Question 2 was noted for category #1, which suggested that non-public schools were perceived by interviewees as having “... a better curriculum than the public schools with the county school district...” A cluster of parents (category #6) also expressed “... concerns about bullying and safety of child(ren)...” and they “...wanted a better school climate and neighborhood to allow for improved academic outcomes...” Similarly, responses were also clustered in categories #2 and #4 of Table 3. For response category #2, interviewees identified “... smaller class sizes than those with the public school...” as the primary rationale for choosing to enroll their children in non-public schools. Responses clustering in category #4 suggested that [parents] “... did not hear favorable things about public schools in the county ...” and that “... poor test scores and ratings for the public schools ...” influenced their school-choice options. Additionally, interviewees felt that “...exploration and play were encouraged...” in the non-public schools compared to county-operated schools.

The findings presented in Table 3 reveal additional meaningful response patterns related to when but mostly why parents choose non-public schools. First, responses of the small sample

of parents indicate that two major factors influenced their decision to enroll their child(ren) in a non-public school: religious or faith-based reasons and academic programming; specifically, the parent’s perception linked to the rigor of the academic curriculum. Curriculum rigor refers to things such as specialized program options (e.g. college readiness), focus on critical thinking skills, and a limited testing focus. Parents who referenced rigorous curriculum as a primary influence also cited the academic reputation of the school as part of their reasons for making the choice. Additionally, parents cited reasons including the quality of learning environment including the school climate (e.g. student interactions with their peers, students’ sense of safety, and absence of bullying). Another major reason cited as a significant influence in parent choice was access to more cultural and social opportunities. There were also some instances whereby there was never a consideration that the children of these sampled families would enroll their children in public schools.

Table 4

Summary of Responses for Interview Question 4 by Interviewees

#	Response Category	Parents
1	“... Yes, we applied to two or more other non-public schools for our child(ren) ...”	Parent 01, Parent 03, Parent 09, Parent 10, Parent 11, Parent 14, Parent 15
2	“... No, we did not consider any other non-public schools for our preschool age child(ren) ...”	Parent 04

3	“... No, we applied to only one non-public school for our child(ren) ...”	Parent 02, Parent 05, Parent 06, Parent 07, Parent 08, Parent 12, Parent 13
4	“... Yes, we did apply to the lottery offered by the county public school district ...”	Parent 05, Parent 09 Parent 14, Parent 15
5	“... No, we did not apply to the lottery offered by the county public school district ...”	Parent 01, Parent 02, Parent 03, Parent 04, Parent 06, Parent 07, Parent 08, Parent 10, Parent 11, Parent 12

Table 4 captures the data where interviewees were queried about the range of non-public school options they considered. Also, the families were asked whether they participated in lottery offered for the county school district for enrolling their children in a premier public school. As shown in Table 4, several interviewees state that “...No, we did not apply to the lottery offered by the county public school district...”; reflected in response category #5.

Equal frequencies were noted for response categories #1 and #3. Response category #1 contained responses indicating that “...Yes, we applied to two or more other non-public schools for our child(ren) ...” In contrast, the responses clustered within response category #3 stated “... No, we applied to only one non-public school for our child(ren) ...” This is of interest because whether a family explored one or multiple non-public schools, they expressed that they were convinced in their exploration that public school was not the best option for their child or children.

To further summarize, the data presented in Table 1, 2, and 3 suggests that among those families interviewed, in addition to the factors noted in research question 1, such as religion, and access to rigorous curriculum or school climate, parents also selected a non-public school that

offered greater cultural diversity and social flexibility, had free or reduced tuition and were in a few cases, were in proximity to a parent's home or workplace. The families had not applied to the district lottery and were evenly split about the process of selecting the non-public school option. Half of those interviewed had explored several different non-public schools before making an enrollment decision. In contrast, the other half had considered only one non-public school in which to place their children.

Analyses for Research Question 2

The objective for Research Question 2 was to assess the specific types of pedagogical and curriculum concerns, along with school culture and leadership concerns, that weighed into school-choice decisions for African American families sampled in the current research. Specifically, the research question was stated as: Are there unique influences of curriculum and instruction; safety and discipline; and management and infrastructure that weigh into school-choice decisions for middle-class African American parents?

The same analysis approach used for the previous research questions was applied to data related to Research Question 2. That is, responses provided by the sampled families were condensed into thematic categories to enable the exploration of key data patterns. Further, the clustering of responses within a given response category reflected prevailing viewpoints and attitudes of the middle-class African American families selected for the research sample. It is also noted that response data linked to curriculum in Tables 2 and 3 are substantively relevant for addressing Research Question 2.

Referring to Table 2, there was a small cluster of responses within response category #1 that noted the influence of "... improved academic offerings..." in non-public schools "... in comparison to public schools specifically, at the secondary level ..." in parents' school choice

decisions. A similar response category emerged in response category #1 in Table 3, where a large cluster of responses stated that non-public schools offered “... a better curriculum than the public schools within the county school district ...” Within this same vein, response category #12 in Table 3 highlighted the importance of “... Critical thinking as a curriculum focus ...” in the family’s decision to enroll their children in a non-public school

A large cluster of responses offered mixed viewpoints on academic and school safety issues in their selection of non-public schools for their children. Specifically, category #6 in Table 3 reflected a high frequency of interviewees who expressed “... concerns about bullying and safety of child(ren)” and stated that they “... wanted a better school climate and neighborhood to allow for improved academic outcomes ...” Another relevant response pattern was reflected in category #4 in Table 2, where a cluster of interviewees expressed that they “... did not hear favorable things about public schools in the county” and expressed concern about “...poor test scores and rating for the public schools ...” These two response categories are related to both the pedagogical and school safety dimension of Research Question 3.

Only one response in the research sample suggested the importance of management and infrastructure issues in the school choice decision. Referring again to Table 2, the response category #8 highlighted the viewpoint expressed by a single interviewee who noted that “...Greater ‘customer support’ was offered by private schools to address the special needs of child(ren) ...”; this was key in this interviewee’s decision for non-public school enrollment. Based simply on the limited response frequency in this area, it appears that limited importance was given to management and related aspects of the education process when school-choice decisions were being made by families included in this research sample.

Analyses for Research Question 3

Research Question 3 was focused on the influence of social networks that in the decision-making process for school enrollment relative to middle-class African American families. The research question was specifically stated as: Are there unique influences of familial and social networks that weigh into school-choice decisions for middle-class African American parents? Following the same data analysis scheme used with previous research questions, responses given by the sampled families were condensed into thematic categories to facilitate a descriptive exploration of salient data patterns.

Similarly, a review of the clustering of responses within a given response category reflects the prevailing viewpoints and attitudes of the African American families included in the research sample. Note that certain response data presented for other research questions relate to the analyses for Research Question 3, however responses obtained from the Interview Question 5 are focused more closely on the substantive intent for this question. Most importantly, Interview Question 5 addresses networking issues relative to school choice and how relatives and friends might have contributed to a family's choice to enroll their children in a non-public school.

Table 5

Summary of Responses for interview Question 5 by Interviews

#	Response Category	Parents
1	"... Attended a fair focused on funding options for Black students, sponsored by independent schools in district ..."	Parent 01
2	"... Parents of children enrolled in non-public schools provided useful information for decision making ..."	Parent 01
3	"... On-line search provided helpful information about non-public schools' options for our child(ren) ..."	Parent 02, Parent 04

4	“... A neighbor offered first-hand information about the school we selected, much of which was negative; it may influence future decisions ...”	Parent 02
5	“... Parents with children enrolled in school expressed shared values about faith-based education for their children; this was highly influential ...”	Parent 02, Parent 06, Parent 06, Parent 13
6	“... Several family members and friends enrolled their children in non-public schools; this network of experienced parents influenced our decision ...”	Parent 03, Parent 09, Parent 04, Parent 10, Parent 13, Parent 15
7	“... We decided on our own to find a good educational fit for our child(ren); no other influences ...”	Parent 05, Parent 08
8	“... Views expressed by the pastor of our church were a key influence in decision for faith-based school ...”	Parent 06
9	“... A diverse network of friends had the strongest influence on the choice for a non-public school ...”	Parent 07, Parent 12
10	“... Social network of friends and family members had a major influence on our selection of a non-public school; suggestions by co-workers were key ...”	Parent 03, Parent 04, Parent 09, Parent 10, Parent 12, Parent 13
11	“... The ‘A Better Chance’ organization was important in the choice of a private school for child(ren) ...”	Parent 09
12	“... We left the choice of school up to the child(ren), after we all visited the building ...”	Parent 14

Response categories generated from interviewees in response to Interview Question 5 are shown in Table 4. Based on the interviews of sampled families, a total of 12 thematic categories

were generated during the data condensation process. There were two categories where high frequencies of responses were clustered in this analysis—response categories #6 and #10. Nearly half of the responses were clustered within response category #3 and these interviewees suggested that “... several family members and friends enrolled their children in non-public schools...,” and the interviewees went on to state that “... this network of experienced parents influenced our decision ...”

The same high frequency of responses-nearly half-were clustered within response category #10. In this instance, the responses of the interviewees revealed their “... social network of friends and family members had a major influence on our selection of a non-public school ...” or that “... suggestions by co-workers were key ...” to the decision to enroll their children in a non-public school.

A somewhat lower frequency of responses was clustered within response category #5 of Table 4. These interviewees suggested that “... Parents with children enrolled in school expressed shared values about faith-based education for their children...” during a visit to the campus. Further, these interviewees stated that sharing by other parents “... was highly influential ...” in their school-choice process.

A cluster of responses was also noted for response categories #3 and #9. Responses clustered in category #3 suggested that an “... on-line search provided helpful information about non-public school options for our child(ren) ...” For response category #9, the clustered interviewees indicated that “... a diverse network of friends had the strongest influence on the choice for a non-public school ...” (refer to Table 4).

In summary, the findings regarding Research Question 3 revealed that both familial and social networks were most prominent factors in the decision-making process regarding school

enrollment. As reflected in the response patterns, spouses, siblings, co-workers, neighbors, and friends all contributed to school-choice decisions of the families included in this research sample. In a few cases, the interviewees relied upon information obtained from the internet while others sought information from public service organizations.

Limitations of the Study

This dissertation research study has a few limitations, one of which is the sample size. As noted above, only 15 parents completed interviews. In one school, the administrator was unable to recruit any parent. Additionally, three parents from a school which was initially identified as part of the study, did not follow up though each of them preliminarily agreed to participate. Ultimately none of these three parents participated mostly likely because of the timing of the study occurring during summer and families were unavailable due to vacation travel.

All participants identified themselves as either African or African- American. Thus, findings are not necessarily generalizable to all Black families. However, the study is still significant given the dearth of the research centering the experiences and perceptions of Black families as it relates to school choice particularly because the most prevalent research focuses on minority families of low socio-economic status. Another limitation of the study is the specificity and uniqueness of the community that these families represent. There are only three counties in the United States that have a similar racial and economic demographic as the District. However, although the findings from this study may not be widely generalizable, they are likely to be transferable to other contexts which share some similarities and this research study provides insight into school choice considerations that transcend this district's boundaries.

Conclusion

The reasons for which middle class African American families choose schools outside of their neighborhood public school communities vary. The “pulls”, or specific characteristics or influences that attract parents to a particular school, as outlined in this study, for these parents specifically, include a desire to have a school setting that reflects their personal core values. Additional “pulls” include alignment to religious preferences, a perceived sense that the school is a good fit for their child, of critical importance, the perceptions of members of their respective social networks, including neighbors, immediate family and friends. This is a finding that is unique from the research explored in this study where parents primarily chose religious schools (e.g. Catholic Schools) because of the teachings linked to values rather than what these parents desired in some cases, a denominational focus. In either case, once the decision is made for a non-public school, these families prioritize selecting a school with rigorous curriculum programming and a proven track record of academic success among students. This aligns with the study by Altenhofen, et al., where academics are a priority driver for parental choice in private schools. Another primary driver for their choice in a non-public school, is a shared sense among both the child and the parents that opportunities for engagement in the school community will exist for their child.

While a specialty program lottery in the district where the study occurred represents an alternative to the neighborhood public schools, that offers access to rigorous programming, only one of the study participants considered this option as an alternative to the neighborhood public school. While four respondents claimed to have applied to the lottery programs offered by the local school districts, participants overwhelmingly were expressed that they were not convinced that these lottery programs offered the rigor that was touted. All participants perceived that their

social networks including family, friends, and information obtained from families who both enrolled their children in the specialty programs offered evidenced that they felt was compelling in favor of an alternative to both the traditional comprehensive programs as well these specialty programs. This is well aligned with the “push” factors that detract parents from their traditional, neighborhood public schools.

The pushes that parents identified as outlined in the study findings include a parent’s perception about the lack of rigor offered in the public schools, a misalignment to personal values, and a perceived “one size fits” all culture at their neighborhood school. Additionally, a significant finding was that many of the parents in the sample were detracted from the public school because of a perception that the school was not a best fit for their child in that their children’s strengths and weaknesses might not be leveraged to advance the learning outcomes of their children. Many of these perceptions emerge from shared experiences of members of the parents’ respective social networks. Despite the differences in demographics of the study sample and the samples referenced in the literature on school choice, there are many commonalities in the influences on the choice of school. The variety of theoretical frameworks represented in school choice research that is available, which widely represent the perspectives of non-minority families who are affluent or minority families of low socioeconomic status reflect thematic similarities including a desire to seek an academic experience where the curriculum is rigorous and where there are high academic outcomes reflected school-wide, and a desire to ensure safety and security for the child which leads to a sense of safety for the family. The distinctions in the influences on school choice among the African American families studied include the selection of a school where the family’s core values are emphasized. Religious values played a key role in the school choice among these families. In the cases where families emphasized religion, these

schools, from the perspective of these parents, were places where safety could be assured for each of their children. Further, in settings where families felt assured that their children were safe, participants highlighted that they felt that both they and their child(ren) felt a sense of community within their school of choice. This sense of community or “belonging” that students experienced, according to participants, also led to an increased engagement among the students in outside extra and intra curricular activities that further promoted student focus on citizenship or doing what was right both for themselves and for others within their school community.

Another unique element significantly influencing the choice of a school by an overwhelming number of the participants interviewed included feedback and reflections from their respective social networks, including family, friends and a variety of media that they stated informed their decision to not choose public schools an option for their child or children. While a few parents commented on the influence of the media and information identified on the internet about school performance as a factor in the decisions they made to opt out of the public schools, overwhelmingly parents interviewed shared how the viewpoints of neighbors and friends with school age children, as well as family, were impactful in the choice they made. Once parents determined that a nonpublic school was the best choice for their child, in a small number of cases, parents included the child as part of the decision-making to identify the specific non-public school the child would attend. The factors influencing family choice in these cases included a feeling among both the child and the parents that the school met the unique needs of the child (both academic and social), the smaller class sizes, and a sense that there was a heightened peer culture of success. Unlike the results of much of the research that was highlighted within the literature review in Section 2, convenience and proximity to home was almost inconsequential to the participants of this study.

Study Implications

A major implication of this research study is the need for more research studies that consider the diversity of voices and experiences of African American families as well as other minority families. More specifically, the predominant voice reflected among minority families in the research on school choice and the associated influences are that of families of low socio-economic status. Since middle class and affluent African American families are not a monolithic group, there must be specific attention paid to ensuring research is not solely conducted on those families with limited financial resources like many current studies. It is important that the research include the entire spectrum of families, including differences related to geography, class, ethnicity, gender, school type, and familial structure. Second, research should be conducted with, and by these families, not solely on them and should not be limited to a fixed methodology. To learn more deeply about the considerations that families that have opted out of the public schools, the District might consider action research either collaboratively led by employees of and families within the District as primary investigators of and contributors to this research. Lastly, and arguably most importantly, there must be research that includes a continuous approach meant to truly understand rather than affirm prevalent beliefs about African American families' experiences and perspectives as it relates to school choice.

Systemic Implications- Responding to the “Pushes”

With all participants of this study representing a strong sample of potential “customers” of the District that are being lost to competing schools, the District should consider the mechanisms it has most recently employed to enhance satisfaction among families that not only retain, but attract them back to the District after departure and at the onset of their children’s

academic experience. More specifically, the District should give strong consideration as to how to eliminate the “pushes” that drive families from the study demographic away from its schools; particularly given that the sample demographic is reflective of the overall district demographic. Table 6 outlines recommendations that correspond to the aforementioned “pushes” outlined in the study conclusions. At present, the District administers a bi-annual climate survey that is facilitated by schools to explore parental, staff, and student satisfaction and perceptions on a variety of indicators including but not limited to: implementation of the vision by the principal, facilities, and safety. The aggregate results might be leveraged more strategically to inform decisions and leveraging resources to favorably impact systemic outcomes. This is relevant as a cross section of the study participants did preliminarily enroll their children in the school district. Additionally, a significant finding from this study is that almost all participants leveraged the feedback or took into considerations the perceptions of someone other than themselves as part of the decision making. The District and other public school districts like it might consider how they might more strategically communicate the satisfactions of those families that stay within the school system as a vehicle for promoting and attracting families to the public schools. Often, the District uses employees to provide information about academic programming and opportunities to potential and incoming families and students at varied levels. Greater consideration might be given to investing time and resources to promote participation among families who express satisfaction with the academic and social experiences that their children are having. Should this opportunity be created for parents to share their perspectives more broadly, an emphasis might be placed on targeting families within their respective communities to promote the potential for parents to more easily recognize and connect with families that they identify with.

Table 6

Systemic recommendations aligned to influences that “push” parents away from neighborhood schools

Push	Recommendation(s)
Perceptions about lack of rigor in academic programming	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strategically spotlight student academic success stories 2. Replicate and/or expand “legacy” programs that have outstanding academic reputations among the community at large and among families
Misalignment in Values (e.g. “will/can the schools teach my child how to do the right things?”)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Spotlight character education programs (e.g. Positive Behavior Interventions Program – PBIS)
Lack of differentiation to “best fit” the needs of an individual child vs. “one size fits all” approach to learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Broaden district communication strategy to include social media and traditional media outlets that highlight both the diversity of the student populations as well as systemic successes in best meeting the needs of this diverse population
Negative perceptions among community at large	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Counter negative media with positive media blasts and information about systemic initiatives 2. Leverage “happy families” to share satisfaction linked to the work of the district.
Parents unaware of the breadth of options to meet the needs of their children	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop a communication strategy both systemically as well as for schools to share offerings with appropriate communities. 2. Exhaust media outlets as an option available to share information with parents

Appendices

Appendix A: Appeal to School Leaders

Study Title: Investigating the reasons middle class, African-American families opt out of the public schools in a large urban school district.

Dear School Leader,

My name is Rotunda Floyd-Cooper and I am a doctoral candidate in the Education Department at the University of Maryland, College Park. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree in Educational Leadership and I would like your support in identifying four (4) families within your school community that might be invited to participate.

I am studying the indicators that inform school choice among families who choose private schools. Families who agree to participate may have one or both parents to *meet* with me for an interview focusing on the factors that influenced their decision to choose to opt out of the public-school system and to choose your school. We will also discuss the influence of social networks on their choice. The meeting will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place, and should last about 30 minutes. Prior to initiating the interviews, participants will be asked to sign an informed consent form. The interviews will be audio taped so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The recordings will only be reviewed by myself and one other member of my research team who will transcribe and analyze them. They will be stored securely for three years after which they will then be destroyed.

Please emphasize to potential participants that their participation is confidential but despite this, they will not have to answer any questions that they do not wish to. Although participating parents probably will not benefit directly from participating in this study, we hope that the results will help both your school leaders as well as leaders within the public schools to gain valuable insights that will lead to strategic school improvement efforts that benefit both students and families.

If you find it appropriate, feel free to provide me the names and contact information for potential participants and I will contact each of them. If it is more convenient to have potential participants to contact me, feel free to provide them the email address and/or phone number listed below. Please know that I would be happy to answer any questions that either you or they have about the study to increase comfort as parents consider participation. I will call you within the next week to see whether you have identified potential participants.

Thanking you in advance for your support and consideration.

With kind regards,

Rotunda L. Floyd-Cooper, Doctoral Candidate

Phone: 678-778-3443 (mobile)

Email: rotunda@learningtoimprove.org

Appendix B: Solicitation for Participation to Families

Study Title: Investigating the reasons middle class, African-American families opt out of the public schools in a large urban school district.

Dear _____,

My name is Rotunda Floyd-Cooper and I am a doctoral candidate in the Education Department at the University of Maryland, College Park. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree in Educational Leadership and I would like to invite you to participate.

I am studying the indicators that inform school choice among families who choose private schools. Families who agree to participate may have one or both parents to *meet* with me for an interview focusing on the factors that influenced their decision to choose to opt out of the public-school system and to choose your school. We will also discuss the influence of social networks on their choice. The meeting will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place, and should last about 30 minutes. Prior to initiating the interviews, participants will be asked to sign an informed consent form. The interviews will be audio taped so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The recordings will only be reviewed by myself and one other member of my research team who will transcribe and analyze them. They will be stored securely for three years after which they will then be destroyed.

I do understand that there are times that individuals may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. Please know that you do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to. You may also withdraw from the study at any time. Although you probably won't benefit directly from participating in this study, we hope that the results will help both your school leaders as well as leaders within the public schools to gain valuable insights that will lead to strategic school improvement efforts that benefit students, families and the District community at-large.

Participation is confidential. Study information, including the audio recordings of all interviews, will always be kept in a secure location. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed. Participation is anonymous, which means that no one else will know what your specific responses to the interview questions are. As such, you will not be asked to write your name or other identifying information on any of the study materials excluding the informed consent form.

If you would like to participate, please open the google form and select "yes, I'd like to participate!". Please provide your contact information and select a preferred date and time for the interview. Review the attached informed consent form for additional information about your rights and the responsibilities associated with participation. You may either print and sign the Informed Consent or I will provide one for your review and signature on the day of the interview. Families agreeing to participate can expect a personal phone call within 48 hours of agreeing to participate. This will be followed up by a reminder email to confirm your interview date and time. Reminders will be sent one week prior to the scheduled interview as well as 24

hours prior to the scheduled interview for convenience. You may also contact me directly to communicate your interest in participation.

Please know that I would be happy to answer any questions you may have about the study. You may contact me at any time using the email address and/or phone number below.

Thanking you in advance for your consideration and support.

With kind regards,

Rotunda L. Floyd-Cooper

Phone: 678-778-3443 (mobile)

Email: rotunda@learningtoimprove.org

Appendix C: Intent to Participate Google Form

Intent to Participate Form: Investigating the reasons middle class African American families in a large suburban school district opt out of the public schools.

Thank you for your interest in my study! As a reminder, I am studying the indicators that inform school choice among families who choose private schools. Families who agree to participate may have one or both parents to meet with me for an interview focusing on the factors that influenced their decision to choose to opt out of the public-school system and to choose your school. We will also discuss the influence of social networks on their choice. The meeting will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place, and should last about 30 minutes. Prior to initiating the interviews, participants will be asked to sign an informed consent form. The interviews will be audio taped so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. Please complete the form below to provide your name, preferred date, time and location for an interview within the next three (3) weeks as well as the best way to contact you.

Thanks again! Rotunda Floyd-Cooper

* Required

Question1: I understand the purpose of the study and would like to confirm my interest in participating *

Yes

No

Yes, but I have more questions

Question 2: Name *

Your answer

Question 3: Preferred Date for Interview *

Your answer

Question 4: Preferred Time for Interview *

Between 9am and 12pm

Between 12pm and 3pm

Between 4pm and 6pm

Between 6pm and 8pm

Question 5: Please share the best way to contact you (email, phone, text) as well as the contact information below *

Your answer

SUBMIT

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Project Title	Investigating the reasons middle class, African-American families opt out of the public schools in a large urban school district.
Purpose of the Study	<p><i>This research is being conducted by Rotunda Floyd-Cooper at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you are a District resident who has opted to send your child/children to a private school instead of the District. The purpose of this research project is to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncover and understand better the indicators and influences associated with the decision to not choose to send children to public schools among Upper Middle Class, African American families residing in a large urban school district in the Mid-Atlantic United States • Enhance the potential for this large urban district to understand parent choice better and enact strategies to re-attract and retain students in the district • Understand the impact of social networks (both formal and informal) on school choice among parents choosing to opt out of the public schools in this urban district.
Procedures	<i>The procedures involve your participation in a face to face interview that will last approximately 30 minutes. The interview will be recorded with an audio recorder.</i>
Potential Risks and Discomforts	<i>There are no known risks from participating in this research study.</i>
Potential Benefits	<p><i>There are no direct benefits from participating in this research. However, possible benefits include findings resulting in changes within this school district and districts like it that would attract families to enroll or re-enroll in this district. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of what parents of school aged children in the District view as essential as they consider enrolling their children in schools leading to improvement efforts aligned to these essential areas. Ultimately, we hope that tax-paying citizens will perceive the District as a viable choice as they seek educational opportunities for their children.</i></p>

Confidentiality	<i>Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by limiting access to recorded interviews to the researcher. Once interviews are complete the researcher will store data on a password protected computer. If a report or article about this research project is written, the identity of all participants will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.</i>
Medical Treatment	<i>Not Applicable</i>
Compensation	<i>No compensation will be provided for participation in this study.</i>
Right to Withdraw and Questions	<p><i>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</i></p> <p><i>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:</i> Rotunda Floyd-Cooper, Principal Investigator. eddbound@gmail.com 678-778-3443</p>
Participant Rights	<p><i>If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">University of Maryland College Park Institutional Review Board Office 1204 Marie Mount Hall College Park, Maryland, 20742 E-mail: irb@umd.edu Telephone: 301-405-0678</p> <p><i>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</i></p>
Statement of Consent	<p><i>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.</i></p> <p><i>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</i></p>

Signature and Date	NAME OF PARTICIPANT [Please Print]	
	SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT	
	DATE	

Appendix E: Field Notes Capture Document**Field Notes**

Descriptions	Reflections
In this column, record details about geography of the space, relations among persons and objects, and atmosphere or tone of site.	In this column, note how particular details relate to the purpose. This section is done AFTER the observations when you have time to consider their import. The left-hand column should take up all your time as you observe.

Appendix F: Primary Deductive Codes

Coding Criteria	Code
Academics	A
Values (Core Value)	CV
Appropriateness for Child/Best Fit	BF

Appendix G: Secondary Deductive Codes

Coding Criteria	Code
Academics- Test Scores	A-TS
Academics-Curriculum Quality	A-CQ
Values (Core Value)- Religion	CV-R
Values (Core Value)- Citizenship	CV-C
Values (Core Value)-Sense of Community	CV-SC
Appropriateness for Child/Best Fit-Special Needs	BF-SN
Appropriateness for Child/Best Fit-Class Size	BF-CS
Appropriateness for Child/Best Fit-Culture	BF-C

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