

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: Perspectives of 1ST and 2nd Grade Parents about Enrolling their Children in Public Specialty or Charter Schools

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This qualitative study explored the awareness and perceptions of a select group of parents about specialty and charter school offerings in a large countywide school system in a mid-Atlantic state. The study utilized focus groups as the primary source of data collection to obtain information from parents about their knowledge and opinion of current specialty program offerings in the district. In addition, the investigation also asked parents, what additional public school choices if any they would they like to see.

The research was guided by three primary research questions: How knowledgeable are selected elementary school parents about available non-traditional public school options? What features of non-traditional public school options do parents

perceive as desirable/undesirable? What do parents report as potential or actual motivators for seeking to enroll one or more of their children in a non-traditional public school? Four cross-cutting themes emerged during the four focus groups: parents had limited and unreliable information about FUSD specialty and charter schools; parents preferences for program features stressed academic rigor, language immersion and parental engagement; and location of a specialty school and the lottery process were viewed as deterrents to parents' choosing a school. The information shared by the parents were coded and analyzed. The data generated from the focus group conversations indicate: information about how to access specialty and charter schools was most commonly learned from friends, family or co-workers; the most common desirable features and/or attributes identified by most of the parents were: STEM focused schools, college preparatory curriculums and language focused schools; parents were unaware of all the options in FUSD or how to access them and the desire for schools that supported strong parental engagement.

PERSPECTIVES OF 1ST AND 2ND GRADE PARENTS ABOUT ENROLLING THEIR
CHILDREN IN PUBLIC SPECIALTY OR CHARTER SCHOOLS

by

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Section I: Introduction

A number of parents in Freedom United School District (FUSD), a large countywide school system in a mid-Atlantic state are choosing to not enroll their children in their local public schools. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2016), approximately 908,049 people resided in FUSD in 2016, of which 204,311 were between the ages of 5 and 18. However, during school year 2017-18, only 132,322 students in FUSD, were enrolled in Grades K-12. Based on these figures, 71,989 students, or approximately 35% of the eligible population, were not enrolled in the county's public schools. The Census Bureau also estimated that the number of children under the age of five totaled approximately 59,931, or 6.6%. Whether these children will be enrolled in FUSD schools when it is time to go to school remains in question.

FUSD is located in a state that as of September 30, 2017, reported 893,689 students enrolled in grades Pre-kindergarten –twelfth grades (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018) and a recent study that was conducted investigated the increasing and declining enrollments in the state's public schools (Hartman and Schoch, 2015). The study noted that the majority of public school students in the state reside in five school systems, one of which is FUSD. As Figure 1 demonstrates, from 2005 to 2014 four of these county school systems showed increases in student enrollment, similar to the state; only FUSD reflected a decline (Hartman & Schoch, 2015). Possible reasons given for the decline in student enrollment in FUSD included economic recession that occurred from 2007 through 2009 and resulted in a decline in the purchase of new homes within the county. In addition, according to data reported by the school system, FUSD has 208 public

schools and centers (FUSD, 2017) and 106 private schools that in 2017 enrolled 17,039 students. These numbers are slightly below the estimates from the census data that were presented earlier. Of these private schools, over two-thirds (67%) are religious based (“Private School Review”, 2017).

According to the Hartman and Schoch (2015) report, the declines in FUSD enrollment that occurred between 2005 and 2014 posed a problem for the county because reduced enrollment leads to reductions in funding, which can lead to school closures, lack of new construction or renovation, and reductions in other educational resources (Hartman & Schoch, 2015). The leadership of FUSD recognized declining enrollment as a problem in a report commissioned by the superintendent of FUSD, concluded that schools that offer options, such as specialty programs that focus on arts, language immersion, etc. attract parent interest and may maintain or increase student enrollment (Transition Team Report, 2014). Two recommendations that emerged from this report were that the county should: (a) review access to and components of the specialty programs to determine which geographic, socioeconomic, and other demographic factors may prevent some students from obtaining access; and (b) examine the feasibility of expanding the programs to additional geographic areas (Transition Team Report, 2014). The report also suggested that parents desire more specialty programs. While the report did not address charter schools, which are also public schools, and only focused on creating options within the FUSD system, for the purpose of this study both specialty programs and charter schools will be referred to as non-traditional public schools because they require admission through a lottery process, while the typical neighborhood school will be referred to as a boundary school.

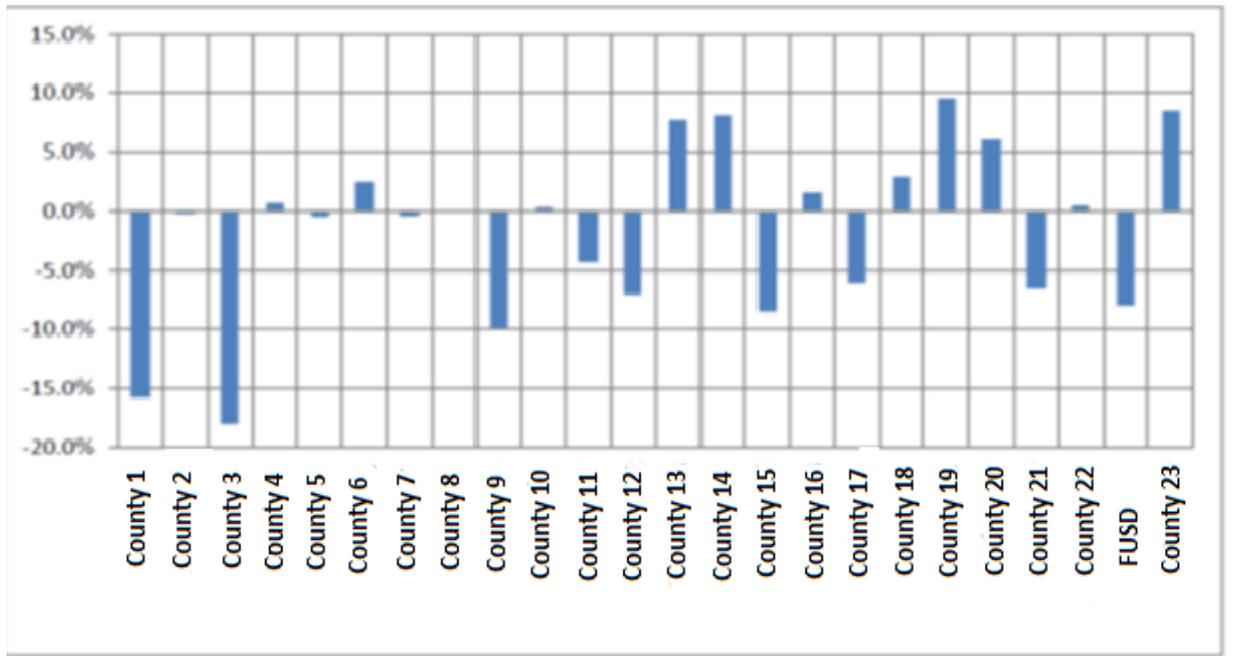


Figure 1: Percent Changes in Total Enrollment, Fall 2005 to Fall 2014 (Hartman & Schoch, 2015, p. 5).

Neither the Hartman and Schoch study or the special study commissioned by the superintendent obtained information from parents regarding their perceptions of specialty programs nor why they might consider enrolling their child in such a program.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to obtain a deeper understanding of what parents understand about FUSD specialty programs and charter schools, including features that they may view as desirable in those schools as well as what might motivate them to choose a non-traditional public school. The intent was to gain additional information that might inform FUSD’s efforts to increase specialty programs and encourage parents to enroll their children in the FUSD specialty or boundary public schools.

Scope of the Problem

Declining enrollments are not unique to FUSD. In 2012, Motoko Rich, a reporter for

The New York Times wrote an article about the country's largest school districts and the effects of declining student enrollments (Rich, 2012, p. A1). Rich identified FUSD as one such district, noting that student enrollment had fallen by almost 5% over five years, despite significant enrollment increases in surrounding counties in Maryland. The article quoted the chief financial officer of FUSD at the time, as saying, "[The] fewer students we have, the fewer dollars we're getting," (p. A1). Rich noted that FUSD was not alone, and that throughout the United States, some of the largest school districts had experienced similar declines in enrollment. In fact, between 2005 through 2010, the ten largest school systems in the country: Detroit, Cleveland Metropolitan, Milwaukee, Columbus City, Philadelphia, Mesa, Memphis City, Tucson Unified, San Bernardino City Unified, Long Beach Unified, and Los Angeles Unified experienced declines. According to Rich, the declines in student enrollment led to many budgetary problems for these school systems. Because schools receive state funds based on student enrollment, a decline correlates to decreases in state education funding, which can create serious budgetary constraints.

Other metropolitan newspapers have also recently noted declining student enrollment in large cities. In Milwaukee, for example, revenue for the public school system largely comes from local property taxes and state funding. The decline in student enrollment in the city's public schools has led to a decrease in the amount of per pupil dollars that the state allocates to the district. Mader (2016) noted that the issue is further exacerbated because significant funds have been dispersed to a voucher program, which decreases the dollars allotted to public schools (Mader, 2016). Milwaukee has the largest voucher program in the country; and when students leave public institutions for private

schools, state monies follow them. Morello (2016) explained that 40% of the costs for the city's voucher programs are incurred by the school system and the remaining sixty percent is paid by the state.

Like Milwaukee, in the Cleveland metropolitan area, schools are funded through local property taxes and a state foundation formula. This formula takes into consideration the school district's ability to generate local tax revenue combined with a pre-determined minimum per student amount to support an adequate education. The formula was designed to provide more support to districts with lower property wealth (Cuyahoga County Treasury, 2016).

Unfortunately, due to declines in enrollment and subsequent cuts in revenue, it is estimated that the Cleveland Heights-University Heights school district will cut 52 positions during the 2016-17 school year. According to the superintendent, "[The district] has been losing enrollment since 2007" (Piorkowski, 2016,). As the superintendent indicated, the district has experienced a steady decline in student enrollment between 2007 and 2016 that equated to about 900 students. The superintendent acknowledged that the reductions in enrollment could have resulted from declines in the number of families moving into the state, decreases in school-aged children in the area, an increase in the number of charter schools, and an increase in the number of students who are homeschooled (Piorkowski, 2016).

Data indicates that there has also been a steady decline in student enrollment across school districts in Michigan, particularly in the city of Detroit, where schools are funded on a per pupil basis from the state of Michigan. Livengood (2016) explained that the amount allocated per student in Detroit for fiscal school year 2015 was \$7,296,

\$3,019 of which was deducted to fund loan payments that the district had been paying for more than ten years. The superintendent of a Michigan district, was quoted in The Detroit News as saying,

I'd say the three major reasons for the decline are fewer births, more students going to charter and parochial schools, and most importantly, more students opting for Schools of Choice...So you've got the same amount of districts chasing a smaller number of students. (Lewis, 2015)

Similarly, Mesa, Arizona has experienced a decrease of one-third of their enrollment or 17,500 students from 2001-2012. The entire state saw a decline from 320,000 to 220,000 during this same period. According to Gilman (2015), many of these students were either accessing charter schools; open enrollment; education vouchers, or student tax credits.

Kids Ohio (2016) also noted that the student enrolment for Columbus City Schools declined from 63,589 in 2000 to 49,841 during the 2014-2015 school year. Because of this decline, the district closed five schools that year and a total of 20 schools over a fifteen-year period (Kids Ohio, 2016). Miriam Bowers Abbott (2016), a reporter for the *Columbus Underground* conducted a survey to solicit information about why parents decided to leave Columbus City Schools and enroll their children in charter schools, private schools, or other districts. Her findings identified several justifications for the departure: administrative problems; accountability to parents, and other reasons. The *other* category included the following rationales: rejection from lottery choices, student safety, and district turmoil (Abbott, 2016).

In Philadelphia, the decline in student enrollment from 2009-2011 was three times larger than was the decline in the city's school-age population. According to Joseph (2014), during this same period, enrollment in charter schools increased by 11,000 students. In 2012, district public schools had almost 70,000 fewer students because of transfers to charter schools and to other school districts. In 2013, out of 205,000 students, 52,000 were enrolled in charter schools. In 2013, the superintendent of Philadelphia Public Schools, stated "charters tend to aggressively promote their safe environments and rigorous classes while many traditional schools just continue to operate in the status quo without really addressing these issues that parents say are important" (Denisco, 2013).

Declining enrollments in a mid-Atlantic state and FUSD. As noted earlier, FUSD has experienced its own declines in enrollment, which have resulted in loss of revenue. In the state, schools are funded through legislation that was passed in 2002 and which (MSEA), 2012, established a new state school aid formula that gives school systems the resources needed to provide all children with an equitable education (MSEA, 2012). This number is then adjusted based on the property values and income levels of each county (MSEA, 2012). The act also makes provisions for school systems to receive supplementary funds for students that receive free or reduced meals, special education services, or who have limited English proficiency (state, 2012). In fiscal year 2015, the foundational per pupil amount was \$6,860, but that total was adjusted to \$9,006 for FUSD. Therefore, the county loses at least \$9,006 for every child that does not actually enroll in the district's public schools (Department of Legislative Services, 2015).

Efforts to Stop Declining Enrollment

Under the leadership of the current superintendent, FUSD has made a significant effort to improve the system's schools and keep students in the district. The system's *SY 2016-2020 Strategic Plan*, states the goal, that FUSD be regarded as an outstanding school system and that experiences sustained high enrollment (Freedom United School District, March 2015). As noted earlier in this section, recommendations from a report commissioned by the incoming superintendent, called for assessing current specialty program offerings as well as how to increase those that are attractive to parents. The report recommended that the system expand offerings that provide a range of unique subjects, or activities/or learning opportunities that offers an enhancement of choice for the community ("Freedom United Schools Lottery for Specialty Programs," 2016). The report concluded that these types of programs provide challenging and engaging opportunities for a select group of students. Examples of some of the strengths cited in the report were partnerships with local institutions of higher learning for dual enrollment programs and the free opportunity to take the SAT during the school day. The report also indicated the need to improve access to specialty programs.

The report noted that there are a limited number of specialty programs available in the county, and that the ones that were available did not meet the high demand for enrollment. The report concluded that, as a result, some families were withdrawing their children from the public schools to pursue available opportunities elsewhere (Transition Team Report, 2014). As noted earlier, two recommendations in the report were specific to specialty programs: (a) review access to and components of the specialty programs to determine which geographic, socioeconomic, and other demographic factors may prevent some students from obtaining access; and (b) examine the feasibility of expanding the

programs to additional geographic areas. The expansion of specialty programs is currently identified as a strategy for attracting and retaining families in PGCPs. Since the release of the Transition Team Report, 2014, there has been a modest increase in the number of seats at some of the specialty and charter schools (FUSD, 2017).

Public School Choice in the United States

In the United States, public school choice options include charter schools, magnet schools, inter/intra district public school choice, home-schooling, online learning and customized learning. These choices are supported in a variety of ways including education savings accounts (ESAs), school vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, individual tax credits and district tuitioning of students.

Private school tuition support. Education savings accounts (ESAs) allow parents to receive public funds from government-authorized savings accounts. This funding can cover tuition for private schools, online learning programs, private tutoring, community college fees, and higher education costs. Five states have ESA programs (edchoice.org, 2016).

Another support option, tax-credit scholarships, enables individual or corporate taxpayers to receive full or partial tax credit if they donate to non-profits that give private school scholarships. Seventeen states have tax-credit scholarship programs (edchoice.org, 2016).

A third form of support, individual tax credits and deductions, allow parents to deduct state income tax for approved educational expenses, which may include private school tuition, books, transportation, or tutors. Eight states have individual K-12 education tax credit and/or deduction programs (edchoice.org, 2016).

Inter/intra-district, choice options. Inter/intra-district public school choice also known as open enrollment, allows parents to select traditional public schools other than ones assigned using students' zip codes. Through intra-district choice, parents can choose from more than one public school within their assigned school district. Parents can select inter-district options e to send their children to any public school in the state or the region in which they reside (edchoice.org, 2016).

Homeschooling. Homeschooling is an alternative form of education that does not fall into either the public or private school realm. Students typically receive instruction within the home, although this particular platform is regulated differently from state to state (edchoice.org, 2016).

Online learning. Online learning enables students to interact with teachers and curriculum over the Internet. This type of instruction can occur in conjunction with or in place of customary classroom learning in either a public or private school setting (edchoice.org, 2016).

Customized learning. Customized learning is a combination of choice options. For example, parents can choose to utilize ESA along with public school courses or online courses.

Town tuitioning. Town tuitioning allows students that live in towns without district public schools to receive their per-pupil education tax dollars to pay tuition at a neighboring town's public school or private school of their choice (edchoice.org, 2016).

Magnet schools. A public school that offers specialized curriculum and programs that is not available in traditional neighborhood schools (edchoice.org, 2016).

Charter schools. Independently run public schools exempt from many mandates and regulations in exchange for increased accountability.

As this section shows, schools across the country offer a wide variety of choice options to students and parents. Despite these myriad opportunities, the present study will focus primarily on two public school choice options: charter and magnet schools.

The magnet school option. Magnet schools were developed to provide options for students to attend other than their neighborhood schools. According to Rossell (2005), federal and state policy makers believed that the themed educational programs offered by magnet schools would appeal to parental interests and, ideally, would lead to the voluntary integration of schools (Rossell, 2005). The desegregation protests that occurred in the 1960s helped make magnet schools a desirable reform option that supported efforts to provide equitable educational opportunities to all students (Waldrup, 2000).

In the fall of 1968, McCarver Elementary, the first magnet school in the country, opened its doors to all students in Tacoma, Washington, admitting them without regard for their area of residence or designated school (Sergienko, 1968). In 1969, Trotter Elementary, the second magnet school in the country opened in Boston. Both schools offered educational programming that encouraged students to progress at their own rates. These programs were called “alternatives” rather than magnets.

In 1970, the city of Minneapolis, Minnesota received six million dollars from the federal government to conduct an alternative experiment with four elementary schools and one high school, each of which had its own educational focus. In the least structured, or “free” school, students directed their own education. Similarly, the “open” school, had

an informal classroom design. The third school had adopted a “continuous progress” model, and the fourth employed a traditional instructional approach (Waldrip, 2000).

Rossell, 2005, noted that the first “super” high school, Skyline High School, opened its doors in 1971 in Dallas, Texas, and offered students instruction in multiple career tracks. Around this same time, the Houston Public School District launched a Performing and Visual Arts School. The first Montessori and language immersion schools opened in Cincinnati in 1973. Some of the new schools were named: Thomas Pullen Creative and Performing Arts magnet (in Prince George’s County, Maryland), the Copley Square International High magnet (in Boston), the School 59 Science magnet, the Greenfield Montessori magnet School (in Milwaukee), the Central High School Classic Greek/ Computers Unlimited magnet high school (in Kansas City). Some of these magnet schools were able to receive grants to procure a space (Rossell, 2005). Magnet schools were in most major cities by 1980.

The U.S. Department of Education included provisions for school choice options, including both charter and magnet schools in NCLB and are also present in the latest reauthorization of the ESEA, “the Every Student Succeeds Act” (ESSA), which includes a new program that supports the use of a new evidenced-based magnet school models. The provision encourages schools to either revise existing programs using evidence based methods and practices or replicate existing magnet schools that have demonstrated a record of academic achievement and inclusiveness among minority groups; select magnet school students through lottery instead of examination; and propose to increase racial integration by considering socioeconomic diversity in magnet school (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

Charter schools. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2015) defined a charter school as a publicly funded institution typically governed by a group or organization under a legislative contract or charter with the state or jurisdiction. As of the 2012-13 school year, 42 states and the District of Columbia have passed charter school legislation. The NCES also identified several states that did not have charter school legislation: Alabama, Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont and West Virginia. Mississippi and Washington have approved legislation in place, but do not actually have any operating charter schools. According to the Maryland Charter School Network (2015), there were 46 charter Schools in operation in the state of Maryland, with five additional schools that were slated to open in 2015. PGCPS is home to 10 of those charter schools.

The idea of charter schools came to fruition in the 1970s, when Ray Budde, a New England educator, proposed that groups of teachers be contracted or chartered by their school boards to research new approaches (Chen, 2015). Al Shanker, president of the Federation of Teachers President during the late 1980s, later proposed the creation of charter schools, a new educational option that would offer environments that promoted innovative methods of educating students. Shanker proposed that small groups of teachers research and submit innovative plans for the charter school classroom. Once approved, the charter would be free of oversight for a period of five to ten years (Kahlenberg, 2008). At the same time, in Philadelphia school-within-a-school models, also referred to as charters were initiated. Other districts later replicated this pilot. Educators in Minnesota also created charter schools based on three values: opportunity,

choice, and responsibility for results. A charter law was passed there in 1991. The state of California passed a charter school law in 1992.

President George Bush, in his 2006 budget proposal, requested grant funding for new and existing charter schools. His proposal included a request for additional monies to help charter schools lease, renovate, or buy facilities (Chen, 2015). President Obama continued this support for charter schools in the ESSA. A report released from the Executive Office of the President (2015), entitled *Every Student Succeeds Act: A Progress Report on Elementary and Secondary Education*, chronicled the efforts of the Obama Administration to improve student achievement. The report noted that the administration established new incentives to improve opportunities and outcomes for students, supported the expansion of high-performing charter schools for high needs students, and continued support for magnet schools and the development of innovative reforms to help close the achievement gap in America's schools (Executive Office of the President, 2015).

Part C of the ESSA (2015), "Expanding Opportunity Through Quality Charter Schools," outlines the various ways that charter schools will receive federal support: (a) additional opportunities for innovation in public education; (b) financial support for initial planning, program design, and implementation; (c) resources to increase the number of high quality charter schools across the United States; (d) evaluation of charters schools' impact on student achievement and families; financial assistance from states to for facilities that is commensurate to the allocation provided to traditional public schools; (e) the expansion of opportunities for children with disabilities, English language learners, and traditionally underserved students to attend charter schools; (f) support for

efforts to strengthen the charter school authorizing process to improve oversight, monitoring and evaluation; and (g) the facilitation of transparency, accountability, and quality for all public chartering agencies. ESSA provides financial support for the planning, program design, and implementation of charter schools; and it encourages states to provide charter schools with the same amount of funds that are allocated to traditional public schools. The legislation also supports the development of new charter schools and the replication of successful charter schools (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

The research on the impact of charter schools has identified four common areas that are usually affected: public school enrollment, student achievement, competition with traditional public schools, and charter funding levels (Buddin, 2012). According to Buddin, public charter school enrollment increased from 0.8 million to 2.5 million during school years 2003-04 and 2013-14. The percentage of public school students who attended charter schools increased from 1.5% to 5.1%, and the number of public schools that were charters increased from 3.1% to 6.6%, or from 3,000 to 6,500 (NCES, 2016). The growth in the popularity of charter schools has attracted students away from traditional public schools (Buddin, 2012).

A USDE (2006) report cited findings about the effects that charter schools have on enrollment in public school systems. The report reviewed 49 districts and found that the systems with declining enrollment due to charter schools, experienced negative impacts on their budgets. The report also noted a combination effect that occurred when districts that experienced declining enrollment and did not grant charters viewed them as competition. Their response was to make changes in system operations and introduce

programs designed to compete with charter schools for students and parents. Other districts looked at charter schools as another choice option, and a few used charter schools as a mechanism to encourage educational reform in their systems (USDE, 2006).

In a different study conducted by the Center for Education Reform (2014), researchers found that public school districts had similar responses to charter schools. The researchers referred to this response as the “Ripple Effect,” which occurs when public school districts initially view charter schools as a threat. The findings ultimately indicated, though, that district leaders were increasingly looking to charter schools for examples of “best practices” related to staffing, curriculum, and teacher retention (The Center for Education Reform, 2014).

In summary, the public school options that are offered in US schools are defined as charter schools, magnet schools, inter/intra district public school choice, home-schooling, online learning and these are not mutually exclusive. For instance a charter school could be totally a virtual or online schools. The brief review of the impacts of some of these schools, specifically charters do.

Public School Choice in a Mid-Atlantic State

The Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings creates and disseminates an annual Education Choice and Competition Index (ECCI) (Klein & Whitehurst, 2015). This report describes how school choice is being implemented in some of the largest school districts in the country. The report’s authors also assert that school choice could impact the quality of the instruction in the district, but only if districts employed the ECCI components that are inclusive of access and quality of choice. The ECCI scores and ranks school districts based on a rubric that considers: (a) the degree of access that

families living within their boundaries had to a choice process that considers parental preference and school assignment, and (b) funding and management processes that support the expansion of popular schools at the expense of unpopular schools and provide subsidies for poor families for choice, especially transportation. The ECCI results in a letter grade scale of (A-F) that is assigned to districts.

In the 2013-2014 ECCI report, five school systems in the state received grades of C or below, FUSD received a grade of C, three neighboring county systems received F's or D. According to the report, districts that received an "F" rating offered families very little in the way of school choice, other than the parent's ability to purchase a residence within the geographical school designation of their preferred public school.

Charter schools in State. Charter schools are the most common public school choice option in the state, which passed the The State Public Charter School Act during the 2003 session of the General Assembly. The Act defines a public charter school as follows:

In this title, "public charter school" means a public school that

- (1) Is nonsectarian in all its programs, policies, and operations;
- (2) Is a school to which parents choose to send their children;
- (3) Is open to all students on a space-available basis and admits students on a lottery basis if more students apply than can be accommodated;
- (4) Is a new public school or a conversion of an existing public school;
- (5) Provides a program of elementary or secondary education or both;
- (6) Operates in pursuit of a specific set of educational objectives;
- (7) Is tuition-free;

- (8) Is subject to federal and State laws prohibiting discrimination;
- (9) Is in compliance with all applicable health and safety laws;
- (10) Is in compliance with § 9-107 of this title;
- (11) Operates under the supervision of the public chartering authority from which its charter is granted and in accordance with its charter and, except as provided in § 9-106 of this title, the provisions of law and regulation governing other public schools;
- (12) Requires students to be physically present on school premises for a period of time substantially similar to that which other public school students spend on school premises; and
- (13) Is created in accordance with this title and the appropriate county board policy.

(State Charter School Law, § 9-102, 2003)

The current governor professed support for public school choice was evident in his State of the State address and cited choice as one way to reduce disparities between the best and the worst schools stating that:

I believe that every child in the state deserves a world-class education regardless of what neighborhood they grow up in. We must fix our under-performing schools while also giving parents and children realistic and better alternatives. So, let's expand family's choices. Let's encourage more public charter schools to open and operate in the state.

(“Improving Education for all State Children”, 2015 para. 8)

Despite the Governor's support, school systems throughout the state have not endorsed charter schools or school choice as a major option. A study commissioned by

the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) and conducted in 2013 by the Schaefer Center for Public Policy of the University of Baltimore reviewed concerns about charter schools (McGrath, Wyatt-Nichol, Borsher, Lovegrove, & Welsh, 2014).

Interviews were conducted with more than 90 individuals including: every public charter school operator and local education agency representatives of districts that had charter schools, had them at one time or were considering them, some district superintendents, union representatives, school board members, and elected officials such as a state delegate and a senator. The findings from this study include: Maryland public charter school law is in some cases vague and interpretation is left to state and local education agencies; funding for charter schools is not consistent across jurisdictions; available information suggests that charter schools receive less education funds per student and a successful measure found in charter schools is the ability to create an environment that motivates students and engages families. The main reasons for charter schools that failed were lack of experience in governance and inexperienced leadership and a lack of incentive for a district to support a charter school financially. “Fixed costs”, such as teacher salaries are not decreased with the opening or continuation of a charter school (McGrath et al, 2014, p.8).

The state’s General Assembly mandated a study to analyze the amount of funding that local school districts provided to traditional public schools and public charter schools (Levin, Baker, Atchison, Brodziak, Boyle, Hall, & Becker, 2016). The intent was to develop guidance to inform how charter schools should be funded in a commensurate to traditional public schools. An expenditure analysis was created was utilized to capture enrollment data and per pupil spending for the 47 charter schools operating during 2012-

2015 school year when this study was conducted. Findings indicated that charter school enrollment accounted for only 2.3 % of the states total student enrollment in 2015 and only 5 of the 24 LEAs had one or more charter schools. However, charter school enrollment had increased from 16,409 students to 18,818 in the span of the three-year.

History of Public School Choice in FUSD

The county has a history of trying to deal with declining enrollment. The creation of specialty programs, served as the system's response to the Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which found that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." Between 1954 and 1972, the county implemented several desegregation plans, the first of which involved the formation of a Fact-Finding Committee established to study the problem of desegregation in Prince George's County. In their report, published in 1955, the committee concluded that (a) desegregation would increase the need for more teachers, so students should be allowed to attend the school closest to where they lived, and (b) present school boundaries should continue but with integration (Cozzens, 1996). During the following school year, 1955-1956, the school board established a "freedom of choice" plan, which allowed students to be registered in their boundary school, but gave them the ability to attend another school of their choice if their parents made a special request for a transfer. According to Cozzens (1996), transfer requests were not well publicized and were only accepted during a limited window of time. Additionally, there was no guarantee that the district would honor requests, even if families submitted them on time. This plan was in place for the next ten years.

The next attempt to integrate schools in the county occurred in 1964, when the US Supreme Court rejected the use of school choice plans and ordered them to be dismantled by 1965. The court empowered the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) to withhold federal funds from school districts that remained segregated. In 1968, HEW released policies on Elementary and Secondary School Compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, also known as the 1968 Guidelines. The guidelines addressed key areas that districts had to address, including (a) offering equal educational opportunities for all students, (b) providing facilities that were not substandard, and (c) ensuring fair hiring and dismissal policies.

FUSD subsequently revised its policies to comply with HEW mandates and ensure (a) that the district assigned school boundaries without regard to race, ethnicity, religion, or national origin and (b) that there would not be any tampering with attendance areas or boundaries. Between 1970 and 1980, the county experienced a significant increase in the number of Black families that moved into the district. According to Green (1999), the percentage rose from 14% in 1970 to 37% in 1980. During that time, many middle class Black families moved out of Washington D.C. in search of affordable housing and desegregated schools for their children (Cozzens, 1996).

In 1972, Sylvester Vaughns, along with a group of Black parents, filed a lawsuit against the FUSD school board for not complying with the 1964 Civil Rights Act (United States District Court, 1983). This federal law prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex (including pregnancy), and religion in employment, education, and access to public facilities and public accommodations. The court ruled that

FUSD had illegally segregated Black students and mandated that the district create a desegregation plan using busing to attain racial equity.

In 1984, a new superintendent was selected to comply with the court-ordered desegregation mandate, he proposed creating magnet schools—special programs in science, foreign languages and the arts taught at predominantly Black schools—in order to attract White students to these schools, (Langer, 2011). Initially the magnet schools were very popular, but as the county’s White population continued to diminish, the schools became ineffective in the district’s efforts to racially balance local schools. In 1990, the superintendent said that “the problems of the ’90s [needed] different solutions,” and stated that he did not think that “magnet schools alone [were] the best answer” (Langer, 2011).

The county’s changing demographics eventually lead to the discontinuation of busing for the purpose of desegregation. In September of 1998, U.S. District Judge Peter J. Messite, approved an agreement that had been reached between school system representatives, the county government and the NAACP to put an end to busing. These parties were all involved in the initial lawsuit filed in 1972 (Frazier, 1998). The superintendent of PGCPs at that time, was quoted as saying, "These are exciting times for Prince George's County. You're going to see new schools being built in communities. You're going to see the academic performance of our youngsters going up, simply because we can focus our energies and not be divided by this thing we call court-ordered desegregation” (Frazier, 1998, p. A01).

In 1999, a new superintendent arrived in PGCPs and the demand for choice was evident, even though the initial intent, the desegregation of county schools was no longer

a driving reason for creating the specialty programs. In 2001, she participated in a live discussion on WashingtonPost.com. (2001). One participant asked the superintendent, “What are your plans for improving the magnet program lottery system?” She offered the following response:

We have just completed an evaluation of our magnet school program. We have received recommendations to replicate some of the successful programs. Additionally, we received a \$4 million Magnet school grant to enhance and expand our Magnet programs. Currently there are 15,000 students on the lottery waiting list. The Board of Education and community groups are discussing proposals to replicate successful Magnets and offer additional Magnet seats across the County. The Board has scheduled a workshop discussion on Magnet programs for September 6, 2001. Public participation is encouraged. You can sign up to speak by calling the Board Office on 301-952-6115. Thank you for your question. (WashingtonPost.com, 2001)

Another participant noted:

I am the mother of 3 interracial children, 2 of which are currently school age. I've applied to the magnet program for 2 consecutive years for the oldest who, each time has been placed on the waiting list. I somewhat feel that the magnet program discriminates against Black children, since most of the programs are for non-Blacks. Yet, the rules of the program currently do not allow you to change a child's racial designation, or choose more than one. Are there plans to change this for the next school year? (Washingtonpost.com, 2001)

The superintendent responded:

The magnet program currently has 15,000 students on the waiting list. The Board of Education is currently considering theme schools that would be race-neutral, as well as replications of successful magnet programs. To get more information about magnet programs, please visit our web site at www.pgcps.org. Thank you for your interest in magnet schools. (Washingtonpost.com 2011)

The impact of school accountability on specialty programs. President Bush signed the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), into law. The State superintendent for education in the state of Maryland had already assembled a task force, the Visionary Panel for Better Schools, to solicit input from Marylanders on school reform. The group had conducted research for an entire year and developed a report that identified eight recommendations and over thirty strategies (Maryland State Department of Education, 2002).

On May 6, 2002, the governor of the state, signed into law a new school-funding plan that would increase funding for the state's schools by \$1.3 billion over the following six years. The act required school systems to develop a comprehensive master plan to improve student achievement (MSDE, 2002). In response to the accountability requirements of NCLB the act put forth the following mandate:

Students in schools identified for school improvement must be provided an option to transfer to another school in the district that has not been identified for school improvement. Up to 15 percent of a school system's Title I allotment can be used to pay for this provision including transportation" (MSDE, 2002).

As a result, 15 counties in the state had to address the issue of school choice in their master plans.

In 2003, yet another superintendent moved into the position in FUSD. The first district master plan that he oversaw continued to recognize school choice programming. Specifically, Student Strategy 1.1.3, in the master plan called for the implementation of the Magnet Task Force and Board of Education recommendations calling for an evaluation and redesign of former magnet programs to district-wide choice option schools (FUSD Strategic Plan, 2004).

When the district drafted its 2005-2010 Strategic Plan, the county had an Interim Superintendent. The plan included no significant changes to existing strategies and no reference to recommendations concerning magnet programs. Magnet schools continued to be offered and were referenced in the plan (FUSD Strategic Plan, 2005-2010).

In 2006, a new Superintendent was appointed and the plan that the county submitted during his tenure was entitled the 2006-2007 Bridge to Excellence Master Plan and again referenced magnet schools under Title V, Part A, Innovative Programs, under the heading “Projects and Activities to Promote Education Reform and School Improvement, 1.1, promising education reform projects, including magnet schools” (Bridge to Excellence Master Plan, 2006-2007). The 2006-2007 plan also mentioned parental options under the heading, “Projects and Activities to Promote Parental Options,” and listed several strategies: 3.1, The planning, design, and initial implementation of charter schools as described in Part B of Title V of the ESEA [section 5131(a)(8)]; 3.2, Activities to promote, implement, or expand public school choice [section 5131(a)(12)]; 3.3 School safety programs, including programs to implement the

unsafe school choice policy in Section 9532 of the ESEA, and that may include payment of reasonable transportation costs and tuition costs for students who transfer to a different school under the policy [section 5131(a)(25)]; and 3.4 Programs to provide same-gender schools and classrooms (consistent with applicable law and U.S. Department of Education (USDE) guidelines for same gender schools and classrooms) [section 5131(a)(23)] (PGCPS, 2006).

From 2009-2012, the county had yet another superintendent and the Bridge to Excellence Master Plan developed during his tenure did not provide any new updates in regards to school choice. In 2013, the current superintendent was appointed and assembled a transition team. After reviewing the report and recommendations of the team, the superintendent ensured that the district focused on school choice in the 2016-2020 Strategic Plan. Under the Extend Specialty Programs subsection of Academic Excellence section of the Strategic Plan, there is a goal indicates that the district will provide elementary, middle, and high school students with equitable access to innovative research-based specialty program options which ultimately prepare them to be college and career ready (PGCPS, 2016).

Current FUSD School Choice Options

In 2017/18, FUSD offered the following choice options to parents, all of which are accessed through a lottery process: Creative and Performing Arts, French Immersion, Montessori, Spanish Immersion/Dual Language, and Talented and Gifted. Choice options that do not involve the traditional lottery process include 10 charter schools, the Center for the Visual and Performing Arts (Jones HS and Smith HS), Creative and Performing Arts grades 6-8, and the International Baccalaureate Program. In total, the county offers

three Creative and Performing Arts school and two K-8 and one high school that offer a French Immersion program. The district is also home to three Montessori schools (Grades Pre-K3– 8th grade), two Spanish Immersion schools (Grades K-5), and 12 Talented and Gifted programs in eight elementary and four middle schools. There are ten charter schools in the county as well.

Table 1

List of FUSD Charter and Specialty Schools

Charter Schools	Specialty Schools
Public Charter School	Creative and Performing Arts
Math and IT PC - Elementary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number 1 Academy (K-8) • Number 2 Middle • Number Three Academy (K-8)
Math and IT PC - South	French Immersion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School 1 French Immersion (K-8) • School 2 French Immersion (K-8)
Math and IT PC - North	Montessori <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School 1 Montessori (PreK -8) • School 2 Montessori (PreK-8) • School 3 Montessori (PreK-8)
Academy 1	Spanish Immersion Full and Dual Language <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School 1 (Dual Language K-3) • School 2 (Full Immersion Grades K-3) • School 3 (Full Immersion Grades K-3)
Academy Public Charter 2	Visual and Performing Arts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High School 1 • High School 2
Public Charter 3	
Public Charter School 4	
Public Charter School 5	
Public Charter 6	

The FUSD has established selection procedures that provide parents the guidelines for applying to a specialty program (*Lottery and Audition Administration and*

Selection Procedures, 2014) provides a list of available choice options in the county. The document provides a list of available choice options in the county, information about how the lottery operates and identifies the admission criteria for each program. The procedures were designed to provide equitable access to specialty programs when the number of applicants exceeded the available seats in the program. Applicants are generally selected through a computerized random selection process.

Identified students are admitted through the lottery or reside within the school's comprehensive attendance area. Students who have siblings continuing in the program to which they are applying receive preferential consideration.

Admissions criteria vary for students based on the program offering. The French and Spanish Immersion programs rely upon a lottery for admissions determination, and students are admitted in kindergarten. Montessori schools also use the lottery; however, the age range for admission ranges from Pre-K3-Pre-K4. Pre-Kindergarten students are accepted on a probationary status for the first eight weeks and must be fully independent in dressing and able to use the bathroom. Talented and Gifted Centers (TAG) accept identified students in Grades 2 through 8. Unlike the lottery programs, students who want to enroll in a Creative and Performing Arts (CPA) program at Grade 6 or above must pass an audition in their area of concentration. A waitlist for all programs is organized and maintained by the Department of Pupil Accounting and Boundaries that includes applications and placements.

According to the FUSD (2014) document *Public Charter Schools Lottery Process*, the administrative procedure for admission to a charter school differs from other specialty programs, but it is also designed to ensure consistency, fairness, equity and

transparency when conducting the lottery for enrolling students in public charter schools. To participate in the charter school lottery and enroll in a public charter school, students must be county residents and have a valid student identification number. There are no other criteria for acceptance except the standard requirements for age, guardianship, and eligibility for enrollment in FUSD. Each charter school maintains a waitlist through September 30th of each school year. Each of the identified options that are offered in PGCPs is accessed through a lottery.

As evidenced by the previous list, options to traditional or boundary schools are limited in FUSD. There are currently ten charter schools and ten dedicated specialty schools for grades K-8 in the district. Access to any of these options can only occur through a district established lottery process. Despite the recommendations of the 2014 report (Transition Report, 2014) there has been little expansion of the specialty programs.

Literature Review

This section will provide a review of the literature pertaining to why parents exercise choice options and leave traditional public schools. The review first provides a description of general studies followed by several that included minority and urban parents.

Why parents choose to leave traditional public schools. The literature related to parental choice includes studies of parent preference for the characteristics of schools for their child and studies that specifically examine the reasons why parents may choose a non-traditional school. In terms of parental preferences regarding school characteristics, in 2013, the Thomas Fordham Institute commissioned a national survey of over 2000 parents to discover what educational preferences parents have for their children's

education (Thomas Fordham Institute, 2013). The survey findings referred to parent “must haves” and included: rigorous reading and math curriculums, focus on science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), good study and critical thinking skill development, excellent written and verbal communication skills. These preferences remained consistent with parents of different races, incomes or political affiliations and whether the children attended a traditional public school, public charter or private school these remained constant.

A study conducted by Burgess, Greaves, Vignoles and Wilson (2015), utilized a combination of survey information, administrative data on school characteristics, admissions criteria and allocation rules; and spatial data to gather information about qualities preferred by parents when they choose a school for their child. Their findings indicated the top preferences cited by parents are high academic standards and a school that is close to their home.

Some of the earliest studies that were conducted in school choice attempted to determine why parents choose to leave their traditional public schools. These studies typically utilized surveys or interviews to solicit information from parents. For example Goldring and Bauch (1995) conducted a study to examine how parental choice and involvement correlated to how school’s respond to offering choice options. Three types of schools from three different cities were included: Catholic, single-focus magnet, and multi-focus magnet public schools from three different cities. A total of seven schools were selected, 565 parents were surveyed and a 49% response rate was reported. Findings from the survey indicated overall most parents most often selected a school for academic reasons such as: academic programs and college preparation.

The researchers also found that parents who chose Catholic schools for their children did so for moral and disciplinary reasons. Parents that chose single-focus magnet schools do so for academic, then disciplinary reasons; and multi-focus magnets schools were chosen for academics, career opportunities, and convenience. Goldring and Rowley (2006) conducted a study of parental choice in a public school district utilizing a telephone interview to solicit information from 600 parents that had either considered applying or were currently enrolled in a magnet school. The findings from this study include: parents who choose to enroll their children in public schools of choice because of academic quality, discontent with their zoned school, safety, and convenience.

In a single state study conducted by Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, and Matland (2000), 1,100 parents that had chosen to send their children to a public charter school participated in interviews on educational preferences of charter school parents. Results indicated that all participants rated education quality as *important* or *very important* in their choice. In addition and in rank order the following were identified: class size, safety, the location of the schools, and the presence of students' friends at the school were also important factors (Kleitz et al., 2000). Goldring and Rowley (2006) conducted a study of parental choice in a public school district utilizing a telephone interview to solicit information from 600 parents that had either considered applying or were currently enrolled in a magnet school. The findings from this study include in order of preference: parents who choose to enroll their children in public schools of choice because of academic quality, discontent with their zoned school, safety, and convenience.

In a study conducted in Alberta, Canada, Bosseti (2004), surveyed 1500 parents of students in 11 private, eight public and 10 alternative elementary schools about their

rationale for the selection of the elementary school they chose for their children. Parents were placed in three categories: alternative school parents, public school parents and private school parents. Alternative school parents tended to look for schools that offered a variety of curriculum options, smaller class size and a focus on community. Public school parents often opted to send their children to their assigned neighborhood school located in their community expressed reasons such as the delivery of instruction by teachers, the identity of the principal and if their children's friends attended the same school. Private school parents were found to seek a school that provided more individualized instruction tailored to meet the needs of their child. Smaller class size, style of teaching, and similar belief and values were also indicated as factors. One common factor that was shared by all of the parents was the academic status of the school.

A somewhat different finding came from a survey commissioned by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice (2016). A survey was administered to 1,397 parents in Indiana who received vouchers to send their children to private schools. The goal was to gain insight about the experiences of private school parents and solicit the reasons for parents' choice of schools with a focus on those utilizing a voucher. The survey identified the five top reasons that parents chose to send their children to the schools. They included: religious instruction, values/character instruction, better academics, and more individual one-on-one time and smaller class size.

A final study that was reviewed and examined which factors influence parents when choosing schools was conducted in Georgia with parents of children in grades K-12 who had received a scholarship to attend a private school of their choice under the

Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program (Kelly & Scafidi, 2013). A survey was sent to 2,685 parents whose children had received a GOAL scholarship that school year, 962 parents responded. Of the 962 parents that took the survey, 754 or 78.4 percent responded to all of the questions. The factors that were found to be most important to parents include: “better student discipline” (50.9 percent), “better learning environment” (50.8 percent), “smaller class sizes” (48.9 percent), “improved student safety” (46.8 percent), and “more individual attention for my child” (39.3 percent). The authors concluded from these responses that parents valued attributes other than the test scores of schools in selecting schools. The survey also asked parents to identify from a list of 21 possible reasons why they decided to send their children to private schools when choosing a particular school. Responses indicated that, “ratio of students per teacher and the average class size” (84.2 percent), evidence the school is accredited (70.2 percent), the “curriculum and course descriptions” (69.9 percent), and the “percentage of students who are accepted and attend college” (61.3 percent) were the most important. Findings did not differ between high or low-income parents.

Two studies that investigated the reasons why parents may choose to leave the assigned public school were conducted outside of the US. In Australia, the Sydney Morning Herald commissioned a study to explore the reasons for an increase over a 10-year period in the number of students that were enrolling in private schools compared to government or public schools in Australia. Beavis (2004), conducted the study utilizing data from ACNielsen, a global marketing research firm, collected from 609 households in Australia. The Poll collected data on family background, parents’ perceptions of public and private schools and what factors most influence their school choice decision. One of

the major questions addressed in the study was the parents' perception of schools that shaped their selection of a particular private or public school. The findings were clear that parental perceptions and values of a school was a significant factor in school choice. For example, Catholic school parents indicated religious values and traditions as the most important factors in their choice of schools and parents of children in public schools were influenced by academics and course offerings and social or cultural connections in the schools. The location of the school was also important.

A similar study conducted in two public school districts in Alberta, Canada examined the logic, values, and concerns that inform how parents select elementary schools (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007). Thirty-one public elementary schools from two urban public school districts and 11 private elementary schools from one of these districts were selected. In both districts, students are assigned to a particular school by the school board according to the geographic location of their home. Of these schools, 18 schools were from Calgary Public schools (8 with regular programs and 10 with designated alternative programs) the other 13 were from Edmonton Public School (5 schools with regular programs and 8 with designated alternative programs). Schools with regular programs were identified in the study as neighborhood or "catchment zone schools" to which children are assigned by the geographic location of their households. Public alternative schools provide incentives to entice parents to enroll their children such as language immersion programs, alternative arts-based, science-based, and sports-based schools. The private schools in the sample programs focused on academic preparation, children with learning disabilities or religious affiliation (Jewish, Christian, Islamic). Surveys were given to students in grades 1, 3, and 6 by their homeroom teachers in pre-

addressed envelopes and returned by mail. Focus groups were also held with parents in two alternative schools, two neighborhood schools, and two private schools. The survey response rate for Calgary was 412, or 37%, for public school parents 429 responded or 37%, alternative school parents, 671, or 34%, for private schools. The response rates for Edmonton were 152 or 22% for public school parents and 207 or 25% for alternative school parents. The main findings from the survey indicated that the majority of respondents, 83% first chose to send their children to their regular designated public school, which for the majority was close to their home, 21% of alternative school parents and 7% of private school parents. The top reasons why parents chose elementary schools: public school parents indicated proximity to home followed by academic standing and school principal; alternative school parents cited academic standing, special programs offered and educational beliefs; parents that chose private schools cited educational beliefs, academic standing and teaching approach (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007).

Research involving minority and low-income parents. Some research on parent choice has been conducted with samples that included parents of children in urban districts with high minority student enrollments. One such study was conducted in New York City public schools, investigated the relationships between the characteristics of individual high schools and number of parents' indicating their preference to enroll their child in each of the schools (Abdulkadiroğlu, Pathak, Schellenberg & Walters, 2017). The authors reviewed over 250,000 applications through the school systems centralized assignment database. Data were obtained for four separate cohorts of 9th graders between 2003-2004 and 2006-2007. The application asks parents to rank their preferences for each high school. Based on analyses of the rankings, most parents, 85%, preferred

schools that were in close proximity to their home address and academic performance as measured by the Regents math exam, an exam that all high school students must pass to graduate. The schools that were chosen by the parents were not the most effective schools. The authors speculated that the lower rankings for the most effective high schools might be due to the lack of adequate information about those schools and thus parents were not able to make an informed decision about where to enroll their child.

Another study conducted in the New York City examined how much information inner-city parents have about schools (Schneider, Teske, Marshall & Roch, 1998). Telephone interviews were conducted with a random sample of more than 500 parents of public school elementary children in two inner-city school districts in New York City. The interviews were designed to find out how much information inner-city parents had about schools. A list of school attributes was shared with parents. They were categorized into three domains: educational “product of the school”, reading and math scores, teacher quality, and class size; the second domain; safety and discipline and the third, racial composition and income of student population. The authors found a subset of parents, referred to as marginal consumers, “parents who have demonstrated high levels of involvement with the schools by actively choosing the schools their children attend, rather than using the default option of neighborhood schools”(p.785). These parents were more knowledgeable about schools than other parents that participated in the interviews. When it came to the importance of high reading or math scores estimates of scores were 17% closer to actual scores; 13 points closer to the objective diversity measure and the area of safety there was no measurable difference. As a result they purport that by “changing the incentives of parents to gather information, public school

choice can produce two flows of benefits”(Schneider, Teske, Marshall & Roch, 1998, p.788): parents receive more information about schools and schools are pushed to offer more of these attributes in education.

Teske, Fitzpatrick and Kaplan (2007) conducted a study involving low-to moderate-income parents from three different cities, Milwaukee, Washington, D.C., and Denver. They conducted telephone interviews with 800 parents who had participated in school choice. About 80% of these parents’ children were enrolled in public voucher programs and charter schools and 20% in private schools. The interviews contained questions about what criteria the parent used to select a school and how the parent obtained information about the particular school. Interviewers also asked whether the parent felt adequately informed before choosing a particular school for their child. Survey results revealed that a school’s academic quality was the most important consideration in choosing a school, identified by 45% of the respondents. This was followed by curriculum focus and school location in third place. In addition, parents reported that, “word of mouth,” from friends, family, school officials, and other parents was the main way they had obtained information about the schools.

Summary of the literature review. The research that was reviewed suggested a number of factors that might influence parental choice when selecting a school other than their child’s boundary or neighborhood school. Some common factors that parents look for are the academic quality of the school, proximity to their homes and the social and/or community culture of the schools. Among those studies that included urban/minority parents, there is not a difference in factors that parents consider when selecting a school.

In addition, the research suggests that parents most commonly tend to rely on word of mouth, information from friends or family or from someone who worked at the school to select schools and/or inform their perceptions of schools. However, at least one study suggested that if parents had more information about school options, they might make informed choices and their preferences and perceptions about schools would change. One study deduced from parent responses to a survey question that asked, what information was lacking when they were in the process of choosing schools, that “parents felt they lacked “comparative information” about schools, especially information on “ test scores”, “curriculum” and “teacher quality” (Teske, Fitzpatrick and Kaplan (2007, p.32).

Purpose of the Study

As noted earlier, FUSD is the second largest county in the mid-Atlantic state that had reported declining student enrollments. In 2014, a transition report issued at the time that a new superintendent came into the district recommended that the FUSD expand more options, such as specialty and magnet programs, that would provide choices for parents outside of their neighborhood school (Transition Team Report, 2014). At that time FUSD had ten charter schools, three Creative and Performing Arts 6-8, four language immersion schools (partial and full), four Montessori schools and two visual and performing arts schools. In the past three years, there has not been any program expansion or creation of additional programs. The 2014 report was based on stakeholder input but did not systemically investigate parents’ knowledge or perceptions of the existing district specialty programs nor what types of programs might be desirable if expanded.

Obtaining input from FUSD parents about the district's magnet, specialty, or charter schools is important since the perceptions can inform the system regarding how options might be increased or enhanced as recommended by the Transition Team Report (2014), report that indicated that some families were withdrawing their children from the public schools to pursue available opportunities elsewhere and recommended a review of access to and components of the specialty programs to determine which geographic, socioeconomic, and other demographic factors may prevent some students from obtaining access; and (b) examine the feasibility of expanding the programs to additional geographic areas be conducted.

Ultimately such information may encourage parents to enroll, or keep, their children in the FUSD system. Therefore, the purpose of my study was to obtain the perception of a select group of parents of children enrolled in grades 1 and 2 in their boundary or neighborhood schools regarding their knowledge and opinion of current specialty program offerings in the district. In addition, the investigation also asked parents, what additional public school choices if any they would they like to see. This information would inform the systems current understandings about what programs might retain and/or attract parents to the public schools in the county.

Section 2: Methodology

This section describes the research questions, participants and methods utilized to obtain parent's perceptions regarding FUSD public school choice options. The purpose was to obtain parent's knowledge and perceptions of specialty and charter schools available in the district and why they might choose to seek an option other than their child's boundary public school. Research Questions

The following research questions helped to guide the study:

1. How knowledgeable are selected elementary school parents about available non-traditional public school options?
2. What features of non-traditional public school options do parents perceive as desirable/undesirable?
3. What do parents report as potential or actual motivators for seeking to enroll one or more of their children in a non-traditional public school?

Design

This was a qualitative study utilizing focus groups with parents from four separate elementary schools. Creswell, 2007 defines qualitative research as “an approach to inquiry that begins with assumptions, worldviews, possibly a theoretical lens and the study of research problems exploring the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (p. 37) “. “ Human behavior, unlike that of physical objects, cannot be understood without reference to the meanings and purposes attached by human actors to their activities. Qualitative data, it is asserted, can provide rich insight into human behavior “ (Guba & Lincoln, 1994 p. 106). Qualitative researchers “seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.10). Yin (2015) notes that among the features that distinguish qualitative research from other forms of social science research is the ability of the researcher to identify perspectives of the participants’ actual experiences and to get input about participants’ feelings or thinking. Merriam (2009), identifies four characteristics of “qualitative research: achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, describe how people interpret what they are feeling; the researcher is the primary

instrument for data collection and analysis; the process is inductive, that is, researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories; the product of a qualitative inquiry is richly descriptive, words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon”(p.14). According to Merriam, researchers who choose to conduct a qualitative study are interested in how people interpret their experiences and how they make sense of these experiences. For these reasons, a qualitative study is well suited to the purpose of this study.

Position of the researcher. In qualitative research, the investigator is the instrument and both the data collection and its interpretation are filtered through the lens of that person. Therefore, it is important to be explicit about any potential biases or assumptions that the researcher may have when entering the study. The intersection of information and choice became of great interest to me during the 7 years I served as a principal of a traditional elementary school in FUSD. Because I believe that children learn in different ways I encouraged teachers in my school to constantly look for innovative strategies to meet the needs of all students. During that time I researched one of the existing specialty programs in FUSD and attended several professional development sessions to learn more about the curriculum offered in that program to see if it might be implemented in my school. Soon after participating in these trainings, I became the principal of a specialty school in FUSD. I soon experienced phone calls from parents inquiring about how their child might be selected to enroll (enrollment was through a lottery and during one year there were 120 children on the waiting list). My program shared a building with another specialty program that had the same level of parent interest. I was principal of the specialty school for four years and while I

developed some insight into what attracted parents to my school, the experience also led to my interest in finding out what attracted parents to other specialty programs or non-traditional schools and what these parents might be seeking.

This led to the underlying assumptions that drove the purpose of my research. My first assumption was that if specialty programs are indeed something parents are looking for then expanding such programs is a good recommendation of the Transition Study and should be considered by FUSD. The second reason was that if parents are looking for certain types of programs, these might be replicated within traditional boundary schools. I also wondered if information about specialty programs and charter schools was readily available to all parents. I assumed that if parents had reliable and comprehensive information about schools then they would make informed decisions about where to enroll their child.

Focus groups. Focus groups are one form of qualitative research. Kitzinger and Babour, (1999) define focus groups as group discussions exploring a specific set of issues, the group is “focused” in that it involves some kind of collective activity. They state that, “focus groups are ideal for exploring people’s experiences, opinions, wishes and concerns” (p. 5). Krueger and Casey (2009) describe focus groups as carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive nonthreatening environment. For these reasons, focus groups were selected as the method for eliciting information from parents regarding their perceptions and ideas regarding current choice options. Stewart and Williams (2005) also state that “traditional focus groups are characterized as an organized group discussion around a

given topic, which is monitored, guided if necessary, and recorded by a researcher. They are distinguished by their explicit use of group interaction to produce data” (p. 396).

I chose focus groups as the particular methodology because this study was exploratory and because I assumed that an individual parent might have limited knowledge or experience with specialty programs, which could make individual interviews non-productive. Instead, I wanted to engage a group of parents in a discussion of specific topics because this method can provide a wider range of information and help in clarifying and expanding ideas and perceptions (Stewart & Williams).

Participants

According to Krueger (2002), participant selection for focus groups should include similar types of people and, no more than ten per group and should be recruited. Focus group participants should have similar experiences because commonality attitudes about similar experiences often leads people to talk freely to one another because of their shared experiences (Liamputtong, 2009). The participants the researcher selected were 26 parents of children in either 1st or 2nd grades in one of four elementary schools in FUSD. Parents of 1st and/or 2nd grade students were recruited because these parents would have had the opportunity to not enroll their child in the selected school and or would still have an opportunity to choose another public school option within the district. The four schools included, parents from 2 Title I schools and 2 non-Title I schools. The number of parents participating in an individual focus group ranged from 5-10. These numbers did generate discussion and promote involvement and were large enough so that one or two persons did not dominate the conversation (Liamputtong, 2009). Stewart & Shamdasani (1990) offer that “focus groups are not designed to produce projectable predictable

results, respondents should be selected from and identified relevance to the research question” (p.17).The four schools were chosen to represent different geographic areas of the county.

Parents were recruited through collaboration with the principal at each of the schools. The researcher first convened a meeting with each of the four principals to share the purpose of the research and provide a copy of the interview guide questions. The researcher informed the principals that their school name would not be disclosed nor their names or those of the parents.

The researcher also shared how the information would be recorded and stored. The researcher discussed with principals the best way to initiate contact with parents in each of their schools. The researcher prepared a recruitment flyer that explained the purpose of the focus group and it was disseminated by the principal to parents of 1st and/or 2nd grade students. The researcher indicated on the flyer the time, phone number and email she could be reached. The researcher also included on the flyer an offer of a \$15 gift card to Target as incentive to participate in the focus group. Each of the four schools sent a flyer home with all of their 1st and 2nd grade students. On the flyer the researcher informed the participants that the first 10 to agree to participate would be invited.

The response rate from each of the schools was: school 1, 10 respondents and they all participated; school 2, 7 responded and 5 participated; school 3, 6 responded and 5 participated and school 4, 7 responded and 6 participated. The variation in the participation rate may have been influenced by when the focus groups were scheduled. The researcher conferred with the principal at each of the four schools about the best

times to offer their parents so as to accommodate their schedules and increase the likelihood of their participation. Two of the principals suggested times that were before their school day began and also coincided with a planned school activity that parents could attend after the focus group. The largest number of participants, 6 and 10 respectively participated in these groups. The other two focus groups were convened in the evening after school. The rate of participation declined and each group had 5 parents. The researcher found that parents did not show as well if there was not a school activity that involved their child. The time was offered to accommodate parents that needed time to commute from their workplaces. Following is a brief description of participation by focus group.

School 1 had 10 parents that participated in the focus group. All of the participants were African American women. The group was held at the school located in a central part of the county in the middle of the neighborhood where most of the students lived. After collaborating with the principal, she suggested that I select this date and time because of the already planned morning PTA meeting and another school-wide monthly event that usually garnered strong parent turnout. The school was a non-Title I school and the parents that volunteered to participate in the focus group came immediately after attending a morning PTA meeting. We met in a conference room and did not encounter any distractions. The session lasted for an hour.

School 2 consisted of 5 parents, 4 women and 1 man and all were African American. The group was held after a school event that was held in the evening for primary grade students. This time and date was also decided on based on discussion with the principal to determine the optimal time that parents usually attend events at her

school. The event that was being held there was for primary students only and the children would be involved in an event for a couple of hours and parents would be able to participate without the concern of childcare. This school was also a non-Title I school located in the most southern part of the county. The session lasted for about 45 minutes.

School 3 had 6 parents to participate in the focus group, 5 women and 1 man. All of the participants were African American. The group was held in the evening at 6:30. The researcher also consulted with the principal and a newly assigned community engagement specialist to determine the time that most parents normally come out to support school events. The time was chosen to accommodate working parents and also coincided with a community food bank give away. The school is a Title I school and is located the mid-central part of the county. The community specialist shared the flyers at a school community meeting also. The session lasted about 50 minutes and did not started 20 minutes late. Two parents did contact the school to say they were stuck in traffic and were in route. The focus group took place in the library at the school.

School 4, consisted of 5 female parents and all were African American. This group was held in the morning following a parent workshop for primary students. After meeting with the principal, she recommended the date and time because it could occur after this event and parents would already be at the school and would not have to worry about childcare. The focus group was held in a conference room at the school. The school was a Title I school and it is located in a part of the county that borders another county.

Background Information

At the beginning of each focus group, the researcher distributed a brief questionnaire seeking background information regarding parents' level of experience with non-traditional public schools. The questionnaire did not ask for names and had the following questions: Do you have a child who is enrolled in a FUSD specialty program or charter school? Have you attempted to enroll one of your children in a FUSD specialty program or charter school and not been successful? (See Appendix A) Table 1 presents the characteristics of the participants.

Table 2

Characteristics of Participants

Focus Group	Grade level of child	Gender	Child currently enrolled in specialty program	Attempted to enroll Yes/No
1 (n=10)	4 1 st Grade	10 females	0	5 yes
	6 2 nd Grade			5 no
2 (n=6)	4 1 st Grade	6 females	0	2 yes
	2 2 nd Grade			4 no
3 (n=5)	3 1 st Grade	4 females	0	2 yes
	2 2 nd Grade	1 male		3 no
4 (n=5)	3 1 st Grade	4 females	0	1 yes
	2 2 nd Grade	1 male		4 no

The majority of the participants was female and was almost evenly divided between having a child in 1st (n=14) or 2nd (n=12) grades. In addition, most of the participants had not attempted to enroll their child in a specialty or charter school. There were 14 parents of children in the 1st grade and 12 parents with children in the 2nd grade.

Focus Group Procedures

According to Creswell (2013), focus groups should include open- ended questions that are limited in number and can obtain the views and opinions of the participants.

Krueger, 2002 suggests that focus groups be conducted in a setting where participants are relaxed and seated in a circle. The setting for each of the focus groups was at each of the

selected school sites in a room without distractions. Two of the sessions occurred after school hours and two took place before school began. A light snack was provided. The designated time allocation for each group was one hour. Each of the groups met from 45 minutes to an hour. The researcher took on the role of moderator, which required that she establish an environment that allowed for open communication.

The researcher created a discussion guide that listed the main topics and themes to be covered and helped keep the conversation on track and allowed parents to talk freely in the session (Escalada & Hoeong, 2011). According to Merriam (2209), “The interview guide, or schedule as it is sometimes called, is nothing more than a list of questions you intend to ask in an interview” (p.102). The discussion guide used in this study: specified the research questions and the intent of the questions, each of which was followed by open-ended interview questions and probes that helped address the specific research question (see Appendix B). The researcher audio taped each focus group session, continuously monitored the recording equipment, took notes and set up the seating of each session. Each focus group session followed the same procedures and no deviations occurred.

The researcher began each session by welcoming the participants, introducing herself and stating the purpose of the focus group. The researcher also passed out a copy of the consent form and secured signatures from each of the participants. The researcher shared an overview of the topic and provided a brief explanation of why the participants were chosen and also as noted above distributed a questionnaire to obtain minimal background information on participants.

The researcher reviewed the following guidelines with focus group participants: please speak one person at a time, refrain from sidebar conversations, everyone is asked to share their thoughts. The researcher also explained that the sessions would be recorded and their identities would remain anonymous. The researcher further explained what her role as the moderator was and facilitated any questions the participants had. The researcher explained that as the moderator her goal was to remain attuned for comments that were vague and probe further to gain understanding. The researcher utilized the suggestions from the process guide to comprise a list of summary questions to pose as a means of clarification. At the conclusion of each focus group, the researcher created a seating chart with the names of each participant, listened to the recording device to ensure the session was properly captured, reviewed notes and began to look for themes, trends and the similarities and differences among parents in comments.

Analysis Procedures

The researcher followed the Systematic Analysis Process (Krueger, 2002). There are five steps in this process: start while still in the group, immediately after the group, soon after the focus group-within hours, later-within days, finally prepare the report. “Focus groups provide a detailed and rich set of data about perceptions, thoughts, feelings and impressions of group members in the members’ own words” (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 51). While the group was in session, the researcher listened for conflicting or vague comments and probed for understanding. For example in one of the focus groups all of the participants shared similar comments around how they became aware of specialty and/or charter schools in the system. The researcher notated the similar terms that each of the participants voiced: “word of mouth”, “friends and/or

family”, “mommy friends”. Steps were employed to help ensure accuracy of the information. The researcher utilized the member check technique as criteria to determine trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985), suggest five techniques that they define as “activities that make it more likely that credible findings and interpretations will be produced” (p. 312). Member checking is defined as “data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stakeholding groups from whom the data were originally collected, is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p.314). Merriam (2009), also states “a common strategy for ensuring for internal validity or credibility is member checks. Also called respondent validation, the idea here is that you solicit feedback on your emerging findings from some of the people that you interviewed“(p.217). To conduct member checks, at the end of each focus group session the researcher shared initial themes and other notations and checked for accuracy among the participants. The researcher also asked a final summary question to seek clarity. According to Maxwell (2013), using a summary question can be the most important way of ruling out misinterpreting what participants say and also to identify the bias or misunderstanding of an observation by the researcher. An example of a final question asked by the researcher was, “In summary, does everyone agree that overall you are aware of a few of the specialty and charter schools in the system and that how you became aware was through other parents, friends or family members? Participants could also make additional comments or clarifications at that time.

Following each focus group, the researcher organized and labeled notes and recordings. The researcher followed these steps: made a second copy of the recording, prepared a summary of each focus group organized by research questions and made notes

of any quotes or other relevant information. See Appendix C for a sample of transcribed notes. After completion of all four focus groups, the researcher reviewed the data from each, compared and contrasted results, identified themes and then placed them in an excel spreadsheet. The preliminary themes and cross cutting themes are presented in Section 3.

Confidentiality and Protection of Human Subjects

The researcher shared with and had the participants in each of the four focus groups sign an informed consent form which is in Appendix B. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, what they were being asked to share, that it was voluntary on their part; their anonymity was protected (their name would not be used and numbers would be utilized as identifiers). The researcher also explained the school's name would not be indicated as well. All participants were made aware that they were under no obligation to participate and could withdraw at any time.

Notes, transcripts and other research materials do not contain individual names. Each participant was assigned a numeric code prior to the focus group and that code is attached to all documents. Digital recordings, transcripts and notes were maintained on a password protected computer and no one other than the researcher had access to these original data.

Summary

The procedures were implemented as proposed and no major issues occurred. While the participation rate varied across the four focus groups, there were no major differences across groups in the characteristics of the parents or in the nature of the discussions. In the following section, the analyses of the interviews will be presented.

Section III: Results, Conclusions and Implications

The purpose of this qualitative study was to solicit the awareness and perceptions of a select group of parents about current specialty program offerings in the school system. The research was guided by three primary research questions: How knowledgeable are selected elementary school parents about available non-traditional public school options? What features of non-traditional public school options do parents perceive as desirable/undesirable? What do parents report as potential or actual motivators for seeking to enroll one or more of their children in a non-traditional public school? In the following sections the researcher will first provide the key themes, by research question, derived from each focus group followed by an analysis of themes across the four focus groups to determine cross cutting conclusions.

School 1 Qualitative research is typically conducted at the location where participants' experience the issue or problem pertaining to the study (Creswell, 2007). The first focus group was held in a school that has a very active PTA, in a middle-class community that most of the children resided. When the researcher arrived, the school parking lot was filled with cars and the lobby inside of the school contained a large number of parents. There was a PTA meeting slated to start soon and a family literacy activity that was to take place later that morning. I was greeted by the principal and led into a conference room where there was an oblong conference table that was large enough to accommodate 11 people. The researcher created a seating chart where numeric codes were assigned to each of the seats around the table. As each of the participants entered the room, I gave them a copy of the questionnaire and asked them to complete it.

They were asked to indicate if they had ever attempted to enroll their child into a specialty or charter school and did they have another child that was enrolled in a specialty or charter school. After the participants were seated the researcher gave each a copy of the informed consent form to review and sign. I introduced myself and asked if there were any questions concerning the form. There were not any questions and the forms were collected and the researcher gave an overview of the purpose of the focus group, shared information about her background and explained how the information gleaned from the session would be utilized. The researcher reiterated that the participant's identities would remain anonymous as well as the name of the school and that the session would be recorded. The researcher utilized a digital recorder and her laptop as a backup to record the focus group session. The participants were all mothers of children that were either in the 1st or 2nd grades. Some of the parents knew each other from either children that were or had been in the same classes together or from participation in school events. The researcher noticed and heard several comments that indicated familiarity with one another. Before the focus group formally began, some of the parents exchanged greetings and briefly discussed the school wide event that was scheduled to take place later that morning.

The first questions posed to the group was asked to determine the level of awareness of specialty schools and charter schools in the county; find out how participants learned about them and also how knowledgeable they were about the specifics of the programs and how to access to these schools. The entire group was aware of a charter school that was situated close to their neighborhood. Initially four participants also indicated knowledge of a Spanish Immersion specialty school and

another charter school in the county. The researcher found that many of the parents were not familiar with the term specialty school and had to provide an explanation of the term. Other participants then begin to share their awareness of additional specialty schools. As the discussion took place, the researcher notated on the seating chart each time that a participant responded to a question. In addition the researcher also noted head nods of assent or if a comment was made and multiple people responded in support or displayed disagreement with the comment. “Up close information gathered by actually talking directly to people and seeing them behave within their context is a major characteristic of qualitative research” (Creswell, 2007, p.37). Most of the responses related to how participants became aware of specialty or charter schools fell into two categories: “mommy friends” or internet. Two of the three parents stated they “googled” to search for information about types of schools in the county. When parents were asked about specific features of any of the specialty or charter schools, the most common responses referenced foreign language instruction as most had knowledge of the language immersion programs. Participants provided other responses to the question regarding specific features that had either attempted to or actually applied for admission to either a specialty or charter school. These parents knew about the lottery, specifically the timeline for applying including not being sure when or how long the application period was open and lack of information about how to obtain information about the lottery process.

The second question that the participants were asked was to indicate what features of specialty or charter schools they considered either desirable or undesirable and the third question asked participants what might motivate them to seek to enroll one or more

of their children in a specialty or charter school. Responses to each of these questions overlapped. The desirable features as well as the motivators for enrolling their child in a specialty or charter school included: language instruction and a different type of curriculum such as STEM, college preparatory or Montessori. When one participant indicated that she would like a school that offered a science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) focus, seven other parents indicated their agreement. Another parent indicated that a school that is “college preparatory” would be an incentive to consider enrolling her child in another school and six other parents indicated that they agreed. Comments that illustrate these points include: “I’m looking for STEM, a school that focuses on the sciences, he loves science so I want to enable him get more science” and “an overall college preparatory type of curriculum, I know it is early to think about it but a school that gears toward that.”

One feature that all of the participants identified as a “must have” was having an active parent group. One parent shared the following experience:

.... the biggest thing when I was looking at schools was how can I support, looking at the scores is great and all, but I wanted to get a sense of the school, so when I called about coming to do an interview (at this school)... they said they did not do that, but you can come to Family Literacy Day, I came in, it was cold I think the middle of October/November, the parking lot was packed, the line was out the door, that kind of did it for me.

Another parent followed up with “if we really wanted to, we could send our kids to private schools, but I think that we choose and make that conscious decision to stay (in our neighborhood school) and invest.” An additional participant also stated, “At (child’s

current school) orientation I met so many parents and they love the [other] parents here, that is what won me over.”

In terms of undesirable features, twenty participants noted the location of specialty and charter schools, specifically the distance from participants’ homes.

Miscellaneous comments made regarding motivating factors for enrolling their child in a specialty or charter school included those of one parent who indicated that, “They were looking for something different and had an interest in their child learning another language.” Another parent expressed discontent with the county schools throughout the focus group and how other county’s schools are so positively perceived. Some other parents nodded their heads in agreement. Other participants shared ways that they help to make (the current) school a good place for their children. One other area of concern that emerged was stated by three of the parents who were concerned about the middle school their children would attend and most of the other participants indicated agreement with these comments.

At the conclusion of this focus group the researcher engaged in member checking technique by summarizing key themes gleaned from the discussion. The themes that were shared with the group were: the level of awareness of specialty and charter schools was limited; none of the participants were aware of all of the available options in the county; the primary sources of information about the schools came from “mommy friends” or family or neighbors; there was no knowledge of the curriculum offered at the charter or specialty schools and most participants were aware that admission to the schools was through a lottery. The features they found to be desirable or would like their children to have access to were: STEM focused programs and/or Spanish or French

instruction. All ten participants agreed with the overall themes that were shared and did not express additional comments.

School 2

The second focus group was held at a school located in the southern part of the county in a middle class neighborhood. The session was held after the school day ended, and was scheduled to coincide with a school activity for primary students. When the researcher arrived she encountered numerous parents with their children entering the school. The front lobby and cafeteria was filled with staff members and I was greeted by the principal and escorted to the library. The researcher put together two tables and placed chairs around to create a more intimate setting for the focus group. The focus group was made up of one male and five females. The researcher gave each participant a copy of the consent form and the questionnaire, introduced herself, shared the purpose of the focus group and allowed opportunity for questions. The researcher posed the first research question to determine: the level of awareness of specialty schools and charter schools in the county; find out how participants learned about them and also how knowledgeable they were about the specifics of the programs and how to access to these schools. One of the participants asked the researcher to “define the meaning of specialty school” and the five other parents indicated that they also wanted clarification. After the researcher shared a brief description, she asked if parents understood and all of the parents verbally acknowledged their understanding. One parent said, “like a magnet school”. Another parent shared that she was aware of the French and Spanish immersion schools and three participants were aware of the Montessori school that was located in the southern part of the county. Other parents indicated that they also understood or knew

of these types of schools. The researcher followed up by asking the group if anyone was aware of the charter schools that are in the county. Four of the five parents respond that they were not aware of any charter schools in the county. The one parent that was aware briefly shared that a friend's child attended one, but she was unable to remember the name or location of the school.

In response to how participants found out about the specialty schools and what they knew about the programs, the three participants who knew about the Montessori school said that they had discovered the school because it was located next to a FUSD school bus lot and a post office and they just happened to notice the school while in route to another destination. "When we first moved into the area about two years ago, we used to drive by to find schools in areas where we eventually purchased a home. We found a Montessori school right off of Hill road by the post office." Two other parents agreed that they too had noticed the Montessori school while driving somewhere else.

A fourth parent shared that she heard about the French and Spanish immersion schools from a family member and a different parent said that a co-worker mentioned that her child attended a Montessori school in the county. Three other parents indicated that they heard of French and Spanish immersion programs from friends and/or family. Only one of the six participants said they looked at the FUSD website to find out what kinds of schools were available. That parent stated that, "my husband checked the website, the lottery was not open when he looked in the summer".

The next question posed to the participants asked them to identify features of specialty or charter schools they perceived as either desirable or undesirable. One of the participants offered that instruction in another language would be a feature that she would

like for her child and three other parents agreed that they would like either Spanish or French instruction for their children. An example of one the comments is, “I think being able to speak Spanish is a special tool, you know as far as the job industry.” Another participant indicated the desire for a STEM focused school and four parents agreed with this comment. This parent, the only father in the group, shared, “I am really interested in science ...a program focused on science is something I would like my kids involved in.” Finally, the parent who had a co-worker with a child enrolled in the Montessori school indicated that she had attempted to enroll her son in the school, but he was not selected. When asked why she was interested in that school, her response was “it is not as rigid as regular school, seemed to me that a child might be able to learn a bit more at their own pace”.

The comments made by participants about undesirable features centered on the locations of specialty and charter schools or the lottery process. One participant stated, “The charter schools are not even close to this area...it would be impossible to take my child to school and pick him up every day [due to traffic] from my job”. The other five parents agreed with head nodding to this comment. The researcher asked a follow up question, “I noticed that all of you nodded your heads, is where a school located a factor that you would consider when looking at specialty or charter school?” All of the participants respond verbally with a “yes”, although one parent did follow up that, “it depends on what they [the schools] have to offer”. In terms of the lottery, one parent said, “I think the process of [applying] is a deterrent, it’s a lottery, like what are the odds of your child getting picked out of all the kids in the county”. Another parent added, “If you have multiple children, what if they are unable to attend the lottery school?” The

other parents indicated agreement with both of the comments, either verbally or through head nodding.

The final question asked participants what might motivate them to seek to enroll one or more of their children in a specialty or charter school. Beyond the responses that parents made to the third question regarding desirable features, none of the participants expressed a particular reason or motivation for seeking to enroll their child in a specialty or charter school. However, the two parents that had attempted to enroll their child in a specialty program indicated that the process had deterred them from trying again.

At the end of this focus group, the researcher shared her interpretation of some of the common themes that were shared. They include: the level of awareness of specialty and charter schools was limited, none of the participants were aware of all of the available options in the county; the primary sources of information about the schools came from family, friends or co-workers; none of the participants knew specific details of the curriculum or instructional models offered at the charter or specialty schools; and most of the participants were aware that admission to the schools was through a lottery. The features participants found to be desirable or would like their children to have access to were: STEM focused programs and/or Spanish or French instruction. The participants agreed with these themes. One of the participants concluded by saying, “information about these schools should be advertised more”.

School 3

The third focus group was held at a school located in the central part of the county inside of the beltway. The school is designated as a Title I school and the focus group was held in the evening. When I arrived, the principal greeted me and introduced me to

volunteers from an organization that sponsored a monthly food bank at the school. The principal escorted me to the library and even though it was after six in the evening, I encountered many staff members still in the building working in their classrooms. Three of the participants arrived at 7:00 and the other two at 7:10. The researcher again followed the protocol of introductions, passing out of consent forms and providing a brief overview of the purpose of the focus group.

The researcher posed the first research question to determine: the level of awareness of specialty schools and charter schools in the county; find out how participants learned about them and also how knowledgeable they were about the specifics of the programs and how to access to these schools. One parent spoke up and said, “ I know there are charter schools, but that is the extent of it”. The researcher asked if she knew where any were located and she responded “no”. Another parent asked if specialty program meant like “dual languages, like Spanish immersion”, and the researcher responded that the language immersion schools were specialty schools. This comment stimulated more conversation as other parents began to discuss that they did not know these schools were referred to as specialty schools. One parent then mentioned that she knew about a Spanish Immersion school and another parent indicated that she knew about a performing arts school. Even though one participant referenced knowing of charter schools, she was unable to name one. She did name a Spanish Immersion school but referred to it as a charter school.

The researcher then asked how parents had become aware of the schools that they had named and did they know how to gain access to them. All of the participants shared that friends, family or a neighbor were their first source of information about the specific

specialty schools. “Friends who have kids, they’re in either the specialty kind of schools or enrolled in charter schools”. Two parents indicated that they had looked at the FUSD website and found that they could choose to go through a lottery if they wanted a school other than their neighborhood schools and one parent indicated that she lived near the performing arts school and that is how she knew about the school.

In terms of knowledge or experience with enrolling in these schools, two parents indicated that they attempted to enroll their children in a specialty school through the lottery. One parent stated, “We registered and were on the waiting list, and every week we were calling and school was starting and we knew our neighborhood school....when they finally called and said he was accepted, school had started, it was too late”

The second parent shared her experience,

I applied to the art program and I went there actually because we live next to it, so I went there (and said) I’m here to enroll my child, they were like ‘no we only take applications and we choose so many kids and its between this date and this date’...we had to apply and she didn’t get in...it’s kinda like it’s too much work.

Three other parents stated that they were aware of the lottery process but had not applied nor were they aware of the timelines or process.

The second question that was posed to the participants asked them to identify features of specialty or charter schools they perceived as either desirable or undesirable. The participants began to talk about how initially they were very concerned about enrolling their children in their current school. Examples of comments that were made include, “My co-worker asked me, what school are you going to send your daughter to, I told him [current school and] he said that is not a good school...in a bad area.” A second

parent stated, “We moved from (another) county, my friends told me this was not a good school, they had low test scores. I was very concerned.” From these comments, it appeared that the neighborhood and test scores were considered important but undesirable features.

Although no parents initially responded to the question of desirable features, when asked about what might motivate them to enroll their child elsewhere most shared their perceptions of the specialty and charter schools based on what they heard from others. Overall the group seemed to feel that the schools were better because “they offered things that their [current] school did not”. One participant expressed, “I do think there are perks...they (children) have more opportunity at a charter school, because they have access to certain things.” All of the other parents agreed with this comment.

The researcher then asked a clarifying question about what the participants find to be most desirable in a school. One parent said, “strong parent involvement” Another parent said, “teachers that care and prepare my child in reading and math”, and a third parent added, “a safe environment.” To each of these statements all other parents verbally expressed agreement. The parents then began to discuss their child’s current school and shared how the teachers, secretary and administration made them feel welcome and their children were in a safe place. One of the participants shared how the teachers ask “parents for their insight” and another participant added that the principal makes them feel like she cares about their children. A third parent noted the importance of parent involvement stating, “...the parent involvement part of it, it is a strong community of parents here and this is my daughter’s second year, we are starting a PTO here and I’m actually on the committee”. During this discussion about features of

specialty and charter schools, the parents began to question what charter and specialty schools offer that was different from their [current] school. One of the parents asked the researcher about the curriculum at the schools (“are they different, better”). Another parent asked if the immersion schools really “taught children how to fluently speak another language”. These questions seem to prompt additional conversation between the parents about how they could learn more these schools.

The discussion regarding desirable/undesirable features of specialty or charter schools led to parents indicating that they were not sure where most of the specialty and charter schools in FUSD are located. The researcher provided a brief overview of the schools and their locations. One of the participants then asked if transportation was provided to all of the schools to which the researcher responded that transportation is provided to specialty schools but the parent is responsible for providing transportation to charter schools. A parent then indicated that the lack of transportation to any of the charter schools would be a problem to which all other parents agreed. The researcher interpreted this as an undesirable feature, at least for enrolling in charter schools.

The third question asked participants what might motivate them to seek to enroll one or more of their children in a specialty or charter school. One parent offered that, “I want my child to be ready for college, I would have tried to send her [to a different school] if I would’ve known.” This prompted agreement from two other parents. Another parent shared that she would be interested in her child learning another language (three parents nodded their heads and verbalized “yes”).

The researcher again employed the member checking technique at the conclusion of the focus group. The researcher shared with the group the following common themes

that were gleaned from their discussion: parents had limited awareness or knowledge of specialty or charter schools and the primary sources of information were family/friends/coworkers. There was general awareness of the lottery process but overall limited experience with the process among the parents. This experience was negative. In terms of desirable features, parents were initially less specific than other focus groups but expressed strong desire for strong parental involvement such as they experienced in their child's current school. Parents did indicate that they might be motivated to seek enrollment in a charter or specialty schools to get their child ready for college or to learn another language and also expressed concerns about the middle school that their child would attend. Concerns about the locations of specialty and charter schools were also expressed. Participants agreed with these themes.

School 4

The final focus group was held at a Title I school located in the middle of the district and borders a neighboring district. The session was scheduled to begin immediately following a monthly parent workshop offered to parents of primary students. When the researcher arrived she was greeted by the principal and escorted to a conference room. The focus group was held in the morning and the principal indicated that the five parents that agreed to participate would arrive shortly after the workshop ended. When the participants arrived, the researcher facilitated introductions, passed out the consent form, questionnaire and shared an overview of the purpose of the focus group. All of the participants were mothers of children in either the 1st or 2nd grades. The participants did not seem to know each other and were briefly discussing the workshop they had attended earlier that morning. The first question posed to the group was asked to

determine: the level of awareness of specialty schools and charter schools in the county; find out how participants learned about them and also how knowledgeable they were about the specifics of the programs and how to access to these schools. Initially, none of the parents indicated that they were aware of specialty or charter schools and one parent asked for a definition. The researcher provided a brief description and the group then indicated that they knew of some of those school. The five participants indicated that either a friend or family member had a child that attended a specialty or charter school and that was how they became aware that these schools existed in the county. Some examples of the comments that were shared included, “A family member shared (information about some programs) when we first moved into the area about two years ago.” “I have little cousins that go to a Spanish Immersion school in another part of the county. “[I have] no knowledge at all except maybe knowing someone whose child is in a charter school, nothing was presented to me or no information was given to me once my children started school, I have no idea.” “The girl I call my twin, her daughter goes to a French Immersion, but I don’t know where it is.”

All of the participants’ knowledge of how to access these schools was obtained secondhand. Three of the five parents had learned from others that enrollment in these schools was through a lottery. When the researcher inquired about the parents’ knowledge of the lottery timelines and application process, only two parents replied that they “think” the lottery occurs in the spring but had no other information about the process or how to apply. Actually my cousin has two [children] that go to a Spanish immersion school, her daughter got in through the lottery [and] was enrolled first and she got her son in as a sibling and he did not have to go through a lottery.” A second parent

stated that, “I just found out (about the lottery) this year when my best friend told me, she said ‘yeah my son got accepted for the Spanish Immersion program.’” Based on the comments shared by the participants, the overall level of awareness of specialty and charter options available in the county was minimal. The schools that were mentioned by the parents were Spanish and French Immersion. None of the participants were aware of the names of any charter schools or of additional specialty schools. Knowledge of how to access the schools was also very limited. The main source of information about the schools and how to access those schools came secondhand from friends and/or family.

The second question asked participants to share what features of specialty or charter schools they perceived as either desirable or undesirable. All of the participants expressed an interest in programs that offered another language, either in a separate school or as part of their child’s current school. For example, one parent noted that her child’s current school, “(has 2 teachers in some classrooms, one could be a Spanish teacher, that could be an extra curriculum that is taught during the day, maybe the morning or the afternoon however they want to do it, it would be better.” Another parent added, “I think Spanish would be... better to offer at an early age ‘cause’ when I was living in DC my daughter was very good speaking Spanish and English she learned in Kindergarten.” Two parents stated that they would like for their children to attend a performing arts school and would move their children to that school if the opportunity arose. An example comment is, “I have a son and a daughter, my daughter would have benefited from that school (Smith Performing Arts), she is very creative, it would not have fit my son.”

None of the parents initially noted any undesirable features of specialty or charter schools. One participant did ask where some of the r specialty and charter schools were located and if transportation was provided and the researcher provided a brief overview including that specialty schools provide transportation and that charter schools parents are responsible for transportation. At that point, all of the participants indicated that the location of charter schools would deter them from applying. All of the parents expressed interest in learning more about the specialty school options in the county. “The county should advertise more, like they do for everything else, you can advertise a water bottle commercial...then advertise a Spanish speaking or French schools”. “I go on the website to see the calendars, delayed openings...see when the last day of school, I haven’t seen specialty school information”.

The third question asked participants what might motivate them to seek to enroll one or more of their children in a specialty or charter school. One parent shared that she would like for her daughter to learn another language and two other parents nodded their heads in agreement. Another parent shared that she would be interested in a different curriculum for her son such as, “Montessori, science” and the other participants also nod their heads. Another parent also had this to say about the need to advertise available options “I think perhaps if [the school system] made (information about options) it a little more knowledgeable out there, introduce it to the 3 and 4 year old moms/parents because they really do have the option to get in, better for them than us with kids in the second grade.”

At the conclusion of the focus group the researcher again utilized the member checking technique to check for accuracy of captured themes. The researcher shared the

following themes with the participants: limited knowledge about available specialty and charter schools as well as how to access these schools for their children, parents' existing knowledge about the schools and the lottery was limited to what they heard from a family or friends, there was a desire for more foreign language programs either through a specialty program or as part of the regular school curriculum and locations and transportation could deter parents from seeking to enroll their child in one of the specialty or charter schools. Parents agreed with these themes and two parents added that another "theme" was interest in performing arts programs.

Audit of Findings

Patton (2002) suggests a strategy of "triangulating analysts— that is, having two or more persons independently analyze the same qualitative data and compare their findings" (p.560). This process is another method employed to "shore up the internal validity of a study"(Merriam, 2009, p. 215). As part of the analyses of the focus group transcripts and themes, the researcher asked two colleagues, both employees of FUSD for more than 20 years, to review transcripts and themes that were identified. These two individuals were asked to "validate" themes by independently reading transcripts of participants' comments across all four focus groups and check for commonalities or dissimilarities with the themes. Each of the individuals found that the themes identified for each focus group were supported by the comments in the transcriptions.

Cross Cutting Themes and Conclusions

In this section, the cross-cutting themes from the four focus groups will be discussed along with the conclusions and implications for the school system. The purpose of this study was to investigate what parents knew about specialty and charter

schools in FUSD, how they had obtained that knowledge and their perceptions of these schools. The underlying assumption going into this study was that parents were indeed looking for options such as specialty programs and that the recommendation of the FUSD Transition Study (2014) to increase these options should be considered including if there were particular types of programs that should be expanded in FUSD and/or replicated in traditional boundary schools. The Transition Report was based on stakeholder input but did not investigate how knowledgeable parents were of specialty options or the types of programs they might prefer. The report further found that some parents were withdrawing their children from the public schools and enrolling them elsewhere and recommended a review of access to and components of the specialty programs to determine which geographic, socioeconomic, and other demographic factors may prevent some students from obtaining access; and examine the feasibility of expanding the programs to additional geographic areas be conducted (Transition Team Report, 2014). In addition, based on the researcher's personal experience as a principal of a specialty school, the researcher was interested in knowing how aware parents were about the specialty and charter schools and if information about specialty programs and charter schools was readily available to all parents. The assumption was that parents' access to reliable and comprehensive information about options is necessary for parents to make informed decisions about where they choose to educate their child.

Based on recommendations of the Transition Report and the researcher's assumptions, a series of questions were formulated to obtain information from parents in FUSD about specialty and charter schools. The researcher conducted four focus groups with a select group of parents of children enrolled in grades 1 and 2 in their boundary or

neighborhood schools. The four schools were chosen to represent different geographic and socio-economic areas of the county.

Based on the analyses of key themes from the analyses of parent comments from each of the four focus groups, the researcher identified the following cross-cutting themes: parents had limited and unreliable information about FUSD specialty and charter schools; parents preferences for program features stressed academic rigor, language immersion and parental engagement; and location of a specialty school and the lottery process were viewed as deterrents to parents’ choosing a school. Table 3 presents a summary of the key findings from each focus group.

Table 3

Summary of Themes by Focus Group and Examples of Comments

Cross Cutting Themes	Focus Group #1	Focus Group #2	Focus Group #3	Focus Group #4
<p>Cross-Cutting Theme 1</p> <p>Parents had limited or unreliable information about FUSD specialty and charter schools.</p>	<p>I am aware there are charter schools, because there is one down the street, but I don’t know what a specialty school</p> <p>I am aware, a friend told me about the website</p>	<p>I know that there are charter schools but I don’t know as far as the extent of it</p> <p>I have little cousins that go to a Spanish Immersion</p>	<p>a family member shared when we first moved into the area about two years ago</p> <p>a neighbor told us to look on the website</p>	<p>a neighbor told us to look on the website</p> <p>my co-worker told me about the Immersion school</p>
<p>Cross-Cutting Theme 2</p> <p>Parents’ preferences for program features stressed academic rigor,</p>	<p>I would like to see French or Spanish offered in elementary</p>	<p>overall college preparatory type of curriculum, I know it is early to think about it but gears toward that</p>	<p>looking for STEM, a school that focuses on the sciences</p>	<p>the specialty programs that have an academic focus and an active parent group</p>

language immersion and parental engagement.	A strong parent group... here we stick together, we text each other all the time			
Cross-Cutting Theme 3 Location of a specialty school and the lottery process were viewed as deterrents to parents' choosing a school.	when I tried to look into getting her into School B, friends were telling me about the lottery, you can apply...(but) I didn't know the dates	...the timeframe, we didn't know, we moved into the county and did not even register until July, and we couldn't apply for any of the charter schools if we wanted to	We checked...only take applications and we choose so many kids and its between this date and this date...	I work in...no way I could take my child and pick her up everyday

Theme 1. Parent participants had limited and unreliable or inconsistent levels of knowledge about of FUSD specialty and charter schools. None of the participants in the focus groups were aware of all of the specialty programs or charter school options that are available in FUSD. In fact, only few parents in any focus group could actually describe or name more than one such school/program. Those that did indicate any knowledge indicated that they had learned of the school second hand, through family member, co-worker, or “friend of a friend” or because they lived in proximity to a specialty school. The FUSD website was not noted as a particularly helpful source of information for those seeking information about the various options or the application process. Although FUSD does provide information about specialty and charter schools on the website, few of the parents indicated that they had visited it to obtain information about the options available in the district. This finding aligns with a study conducted by Teske, et.al. (2007) that found that even where a parent information center and an

accessible website was available, “most low-to- moderate income parents do not currently utilize websites or parent information centers for information about test scores, curriculum and teacher quality” (p.32). The study further found that parents frequently rely on informal networks to gain information about schools. Teske, et. al. concluded that, “parents rely on multiple sources of information, trust word-of-mouth networks more than documentation, and, when push comes to shove, rely on other parents more than on teachers or administrators for information about a school” (p. 39). Bosetti (2004) also found that parents relied on friends, neighbors, and other parents as a main source of information when choosing a school for their children.

Other research has indicated that information about public school choice in many cities is lacking. Abdulkadiroğlu, et.al. (2017) concluded that that parents in NYC schools lacked necessary information about school effectiveness when making choices about high schools and DeArmond, Gross, Jochim, and Lake (2014), while also noting the lack of information about school choices that is available to parents, suggested that, “school districts should do more to support informed choice by leveraging trusted community institutions and school staff to provide the personalized and interactive sources of information parents crave” (p.3),

Theme 2. Parent participants expressed preferences for specialty programs that were language focused followed by STEM and college preparatory programs. However, there was also a strong preference in three of the focus groups for schools that had strong parent involvement. To some extent, these findings are not unusual and are supported by other research regarding what factors parents consider when choosing schools. Academic preparation and college preparation was indicated in most of the studies as one of the top

features that parents seek. For example, “better learning environments” and the “percentage of students who are accepted and attend college” were cited in a study by Kelly and Scafidi (2013, p.27) and education quality was identified as a top factor that parents consider when choosing a school (Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000). A study conducted by the Thomas Fordham Institute (2013) also identified the top features that most parents considered to be desirable when choosing schools. They include: a strong core curriculum in reading and math and an emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).

Despite the consistency with the published literature, the findings regarding the preference for language immersion programs must be considered in the context of the parents’ general lack of knowledge regarding the curriculum or programs offered in the FUSD specialty and charter schools and the fact that for a number of parents their major source of information came from others who had children enrolled in one of the specialty programs and most of those were language focused schools. However, the same could apply to other specialty programs. For example, one parent who heard about a Montessori school from a co-worker then attempted to enroll her child in the school and another who lived in proximity to a school for the performing arts thought that this would be a good fit for her child.

The desire for strong parental engagement emerged from three of the focus groups as being very important to parents, no matter what school they chose for their child. This finding was not elicited by a specific question but arose from the discussions about desirable features of schools. In three of the focus groups, the parents expressed that they considered it very important for schools to offer welcoming and supportive environments

to their children and to parents and to engage them in the schools. In fact, a parent indicated that while she initially had considered entering her child in the lottery for another school, she is so pleased with the principal and the parent engagement in her child's current school that she is no longer interested in leaving. This finding is supported by a study conducted by Beavis (2004) that found that parents of children in public schools were influenced by not only academics and course offerings but social or cultural connections in the schools as well.

Theme 3. Parent participants considered the lottery process and school location as the two undesirable aspects of specialty and charter school programs. In general, few parents had direct experience with the district's lottery process for enrolling specialty or charter schools and other parents with knowledge of the process had received it secondhand. Generally, the parents did not find the FUSD website particularly helpful nor were they aware of application timelines. Some parents also shared concerns about having more than one child and being unable to have both of their children attend the same specialty - school. Parent participants also uniformly agreed that location of specialty programs (and lack of transportation to charter schools) was a primary deterrent to considering a school other than the boundary school. School location and proximity to students' homes has emerged in other studies as an important consideration for parents when choosing a school for their child (see for example, Abdulkadiroğlu, et. al., 2017; Bosetti & Pyrrt, 2004; Kleitz, et. al, 2000; Valentine, 2016). However, location is not among the main factors in most of those studies. When provided with sufficient information about a school's offering and performance, the literature seems to suggest that those factors may be more important to a parent. At least one parent in the focus

groups alluded to that when, during a discussion about location and availability of transportation in the FUSD specialty or charter schools, added that these issues might not be a deterrent depending on what the school had to offer.

The research reviewed as well a recent dissertation concerning school choice in FUSD (Valentine, 2016) supports the findings of this study. Valentine conducted a study of 20 FUSD parents that chose to enroll their children in a private school and determined that how parents learn about school is a very important factor. Another factor is having access to information about types of programs and how to access them which was supported by the Valentine (2016) study. The parents in the four focus groups had a minimal level of awareness of the options available in FUSD and how to gain access to them. This was due to lack of knowledge of existing options, the admissions procedures and timelines and also to the location of the programs. While the parents in this study were not necessarily seeking to leave their child's present school, they did indicate the desire for more "options", such as foreign language instruction and a STEM or science focus. While this study did not address all issues that were raised in the 2014 Transition Report, it did provide further detail and depth to some of the recommendations. For instance, the recommendation to provide more such programs seems to have overall support by the focus group parent and this study provided deeper understanding of the desirability of certain types of programs while at the same time indicating how lack of knowledge and systematic communication about current options is an impediment for parents. The recommendation that FUSD create more specialty programs is somewhat supported by parents' concerns about location and limited enrollment in the existing programs. However, understanding which specialty programs might be expanded

requires further investigation. While there was a clear preference for language immersion programs, those were the programs that were also the most familiar to parents in the focus groups. However, those programs may be easier to expand since they could be implemented in comprehensive boundary schools. The finding regarding the lack of information and/or access to information provided to parents is concerning and should be addressed. Parent participants were unaware of specialty and charter schools entry requirements, curricula, application timelines and school locations. More information will not necessarily mean that more parents will choose to leave their child's boundary school. For instance, in one of the focus groups, two parents shared that based on what they had been told by others that "these [specialty] schools had more perks" and also "they were better than regular schools". It is important for parents to be accurately informed about all of the FUSD schools. The need for parents to have access to accurate information in order to make more informed decisions is a good thing. Schneider, et. al.(1998) offer that "by changing incentives of parents to gather information, public school choice can produce two flows of benefits"...allow parents more of what they want for their children from schools and pressure schools into being better at providing the desired features" (p.788).

Limitations

Investigators in qualitative research are the main instrument of data collection and analysis; the research is shaped by their inherent biases. In this study, the researcher not only entered the field as an educational researcher but also as a former Montessori principal and parent of a child enrolled in an FUSD specialty school. To limit researcher bias, throughout the various phases of data collection, analysis, and final narrative, notes

and transcripts were frequently reviewed and reflected upon based on the researcher's professional and parental experiences. Merriam (2007) suggests that, "rather than trying to eliminate these biases or " subjectivities, it is important to identify them and monitor them as to how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data." (p.216). The researcher also employed triangulation strategies to include a second perspective and thereby enhance the reliability and confidence in my findings.

This study is limited to what participants were willing to share with the researcher and to the details they provided and their truthfulness. The researcher ensured that the questions used to guide the focus groups would result in meaningful conversations, while at the same time would not cause any harm, invasion of privacy, or embarrassment to anyone involved in the study. Parents were reassured of their privacy rights and that they could voluntarily choose to participate or refrain from answering any questions. Every effort was made to interact with parents as objectively as possible. The researcher made a point of not commenting on any specialty or charter schools in an evaluative manner or expressed professional viewpoints regarding the schools.

In addition to the specific qualitative methods, other limitations of this study are the number and characteristics of the parents selected to participate in the focus groups. While the schools were selected to be somewhat representative of the geographic and demographic regions of FUSD, participant selection was based on specific criteria: parents of 1st and 2nd grade students, attend a Title I school (2 of the schools), located in specific geographic locations in the district. The participants were not randomly selected and only 26 parents volunteered to participate in the four focus groups. The small sample size is not representative of all areas of the district or of the larger population. Utilizing

focus groups can also have downsides that may include some voices not being heard and some participants not feeling comfortable enough to share their thoughts. In this study, the researcher, through questioning and prompting, obtained responses from all parents, although some were more vocal than others. Another limitation included limiting participation to parents having children that were in the primary grades. Parents that have children that are older might possess different levels of knowledge and might be more motivated to seek options other than their boundary school. A final limitation was the unanticipated but overall lack of knowledge about specialty programs or charter schools which at times constrained parents' responses to some of the focus group questions.

Summary

In summary, the purpose of this study was to explore what parents knew about specialty and charter schools in FUSD, how they had obtained that knowledge and their perceptions of these schools. The findings of this study, even given the limitations, did accomplish the purpose. While the study did not provide definitive information about all of the recommendations listed in the Transition Report, it did provide some insight about how much parents knew about specialty and charter schools and features they would like to have at their boundary school or replicated in the district. In addition, an important and perhaps unexpected finding was the desire to have strong parental engagement in their child's school expressed by participants three of the focus groups. This does not necessarily mean that a strong school/parent connection will overcome any other concerns but it does suggest that, at least among the parents of younger children, it can be a powerful determinant in parental choice. Although the findings from this study may

not provide representative insight from all demographics and locales in the district, the information that was obtained does support the recommendation to expand these options. However, future research that expands both the number of parents including those of older children who are at getting ready to transition to middle school would be useful. In addition, the types of specialty options need to be explored further perhaps after parents are given more information about what is available in the district. Finally, FUSD should provide additional platforms to provide information to parents so that they can have a clearer understanding about specialty and charter schools locations, curriculums and entry requirements.

Appendix A

Interview Guide

The following are the proposed objectives: to determine degree of parental awareness of specialty programs in the county and to explore parent perceptions of specialty programs in the county. The proposed discussion points include: parents knowledge of specialty program offerings in the county, parents satisfaction with current school assignment, and what kind of program offerings would they like to see developed or expanded. The discussion points will include some of the following: parents perception of existing specialty programs, why do these parents opt to remain in their assigned school, and have any of these parents ever considered enrolling their child into a non-public school. I will use the following types of probes:

- “Please tell me (more) about that...”
- “Could you explain what you mean by...”
- “Can you tell me something else about...”
- “So you’re telling me that Right?”

Introduction:

Good evening and welcome. I would like to thank for agreeing to join us to talk about your perceptions of the specialty and charter programs in the county. My name is Carol Dimmie. I am a county employee and have over twenty years experience as an educator. I am conducting this focus group as part of my dissertation study, to gain insight from parents about their level of awareness and interest in the specialty programs that are in the county. I want to know what you find desirable or undesirable about these programs. We are holding focus groups like this with several groups around the county. You were invited because you have a child in 1st or 2nd grade and can access and have children that

are eligible to attend a specialty or charter school. There are no wrong answers and you are simply sharing different points of view. Please feel free to share how you feel, positive or negative thoughts. I would also like to bring your attention to the audio recording devices. The sessions will be recorded because we would like to capture all of your comments. I would also like for us to address each other by first names only during our session. Please know that names will not be indicated in the study but for the purpose of our discussion only. Let's get started. We have placed name cards in front of everyone to help better facilitate our conversation.

Research Question 1: How knowledgeable are selected elementary school parents about available non-traditional public school options?

- Are you aware of any of the specialty and charter school options that are available in the county?
- How did you learn about the programs?
- Do you know of any other programs?
- Are you familiar with the process to enroll your child in a specialty or charter school?
- What do you know about the process or what have you heard?

Research Question 2: What features of non-traditional public school options do parents perceive as desirable/undesirable?

- When you think about (specialty/charter programs) what do you like about these programs?
- If you were to consider enrolling one of your children in a specialty or charter school in the county, what would you be looking for?

- Are there things about the county's specialty and charter schools that you don't like (probe for what was your experience enrolling or attempting to enroll your child)? What have you heard about other parents' experiences?

Research Question 3: What do parents report as potential or actual motivators for seeking to enroll one or more of their children in a non-traditional public school?

- What motivated you to seek to enroll (or enroll) one of your children in a specialty or charter school?
- If you haven't considered a specialty or charter school, what might make you change your mind?

Appendix B

Questionnaire

1) Do you have a child who is enrolled in a FUSD specialty program or charter

school?

Yes

No

2) Have you attempted to enroll one of your children in a FUSD specialty program or charter school and not been successful?

Yes

No

Appendix C

Sample of transcribed notes from Focus Group 1

1. Are you aware of any of the specialty and charter school options that are available in the county? **(10 out of 10 people voiced that they were aware of the charter school down the street, 4 of the 10 knew of Spanish Immersion and Fair Park Academy)**

Parent #4, “I am aware there are charter schools, because there is one down the street, but I don’t know what a specialty school is. I don’t know that the charter schools offer anything different. I looked into the Imagine Charter school down the street from my house on Great Schools and it did not seem like they were doing anything different so that is the only one that I was aware of. I know there is a charter school in College Park but there is **no transportation**, I didn’t look into it any further because it was not going to help my cause.

Parent #10, “ I had looked into and applied because there are also certain times that you can apply for and be **eligible for the programs, for instance** the Montessori program, well my kid is in 1st grade now, but at the time we were looking it was either pre-K or kindergarten and there are essentially **3 options in the entire county**, and again for me the **transportation issue** is a big one, cause even though we did meet the age requirements at the time, it was all the way out in Clinton. I’m not going to take the beltway for Pre-K all the way out to Clinton, but I am aware, the website is helpful, at least it does list them, that is nice, but in terms of knowing how to navigate it could use a little more guidance

Parent #7, “Let me see if I can piggyback on her a little bit, the **timeframe**, we didn’t know, we moved into the county and did not even register until July, we couldn’t apply for any of the charter schools if we wanted to and the option to transfer was also very difficult, that has been my experience.

So that leads into the next question and you kind of touched on it:

2. **How did you learn about the programs?**

Parent # 10, “I think I just googled and looked on the website and I don’t believe that I knew anyone who had applied, but looking and looking then I was able to fill out the forms, Definitely it would be **helpful to get the word out earlier**, because you know when it comes to the county there are deadlines, deadline.

Parent #8, I also did a **google search**, my son was about to start kindergarten and I knew about DC charter schools and I wanted to see if this state had any. We even applied for Imagine, and he got on the waitlist and even got accepted but like she said, I spoke to a parent that had two children there and she had a child here at wood and she said between the two schools that she recommended Perrywood than the charter school so let her I did

not know the advantage of going to a charter school other than saying that my child didn't go to public school, so I did not see the advantage

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