ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	NAVIGATING INEQUITABLE SCHOOL ACCESS: PARENT-NGO COLLABORATION IN NEW ORLEANS AND THE PROSPECTS FOR SCHOOL CHOICE ASSISTANCE
	Jason E. Saltmarsh, Doctor of Philosophy, 2023
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This study aims to clarify the kinds of information and assistance parents seek and NGO advisors, or "Navigators," provide in relationships designed to offer school selection support to low-income families in large urban districts. I seek to understand whether NGOs may be able to offer an important bridge between two kinds of social capital: the informal forms of trust and legitimacy that families rely on, and the skills, knowledge, and networks necessary to access higher-quality schools in choice policy contexts. This analysis used an exploratory case study, including 13 in-depth interviews with Navigators and parents and informal conversations with others who are familiar with the NGO. This particular NGO operates in New Orleans, LA and primarily serves Black and Latinx and low-income families who, studies report, may face additional time, labor, and resource-related barriers in navigating PK-12 school decisions compared to their White and middle-class counterparts. These data were complemented by documentary analysis, including internal reports, IRS filings, and employee blog and social media posts.

Study findings provide empirical insights about the perceptions and agency of Navigators and this NGO's unique insider-outsider status. Analysis indicates that effective Navigators "see" schools differently than most parents and district personnel – namely through a lens that combines professional and personal experience, school inspections, organizational network ties, and cultural similarities with the families they serve. As an "ally and advocate" for families, Navigators attempt to share their judgment about schools, personalize information, and provide 1:1 assistance in ways that offset parents' time constraints. Due to limited access to parent perspectives, these findings may lack analytic generalizability. Accordingly, researchers are invited to examine these propositions further. Still, this study holds implications for future research on the value of personalized information, the development of NGO school choice counseling, and the potential outcomes of NGO Navigator services on school access and student performance. Overall, this dissertation deepens our understanding of the judgment and interpersonal qualities of NGO Navigators as agents of school selection assistance and explains the benefits and shortcomings of NGO information support in choice policy contexts.

NAVIGATING INEQUITABLE SCHOOL ACCESS: PARENT-NGO COLLABORATION IN NEW ORLEANS AND THE PROSPECTS FOR SCHOOL CHOICE ASSISTANCE

by

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Dedication

To my best friend Hannah, whose love, wonder, and sacrifice have sustained me through this work and helped me see a better version of myself persistently enough to make it possible. To Juliet, Chadwick, and Scarlett whose unwavering support and celebration have added meaning and frivolity, often at the right times. And in memory of Professor Betty Malen, whose strong commitments to people and excellence elicited my best efforts and depicted teaching and research as purposeful and poetic.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Millions of parents in urban school districts rush to apply to schools, navigate citywide enrollment systems, and try to finalize their decisions between January and May each year (nces.ed.gov/programs/schoolchoice/). Families visit schools, meander through booths at districtwide school fairs, and sift through the rankings, suggestions, and test results that districts provide.[1] School leaders host tours and open houses while their investments in school advertisements dot highway billboards and bus stops, enticing parents with images of students performing music, demonstrating scholarly work, or beaming in cap and gown (Jabbar, 2015b; Lubienski, 2007). In addition to commercial and district data sources, many parents learn about schools through consulting friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors (Bader, Lareau & Evans, 2019), which is to say, through sources of information that they can trust and understand (Fong, 2019; Kafka, 2022).

In this dissertation, I investigate a new approach to providing underserved families with information support for school selection that has largely eluded empirical analysis: non-profit NGO Navigator assistance with school choice. Although not a panacea for the structural inequities associated with choice policies, NGO Navigators may be able to offer an important bridge between two kinds of social capital: the informal forms of trust and legitimacy that families rely on, on one hand, and the skills, knowledge, and networks necessary to get the best access to higher-quality schools (Yoon, 2016; Brantlinger, 2003; Ball et al., 2003). This approach differs from forms of "information interventions" that essentialize school knowledge and neglect the feelings and positive resources of families themselves. These school choice

[1]District suggestions for families about how to explore and select schools can be found at district websites, like the following: https://apply.myschooldc.dc.gov/ and https://enrollnolaps.com/explore-schools/

partnerships may supplement families with information and institutionally required resources and circumvent some barriers that prevent families, and particularly underserved families, from navigating school decision processes. In light of local, state, and federal backing for choice policies (Center for Education Reform, 2021), models of interpretive assistance and NGO information support merit further exploration. Thus, this study uses an exploratory case study of NGO Navigator information and assistance for school decisions to clarify the characteristics, benefits, and limitations of this approach to informing and assisting families as they seek to decide on desirable PK-12 schools for their children.

Research reveals tension between the individualistic market model underlying choice policies and the actual time, information, and resource-related demands of school selection**.** Adam Smith's (1776) notion of the "invisible hand" asserts that when individuals pursue their self-interest in a free market, their choices will indirectly benefit others by promoting efficiency and balancing supply and demand. These same market principles underlie neoliberal approaches to public service reforms, which argue that government regulation is intrusive and unnecessary (Harvey, 2007). Since the 1980s, a narrative of failing public schools has fueled neoliberal reform encouraging individual "choice" and institutional competition (Lipman, 2015). Market approaches assume that individuals possess full information about goods and services, however, that is rarely, if ever, the case in a market for schools. Districts tend to disseminate condensed and limited kinds of insight about schools. Many families have difficulties obtaining information given that they may "shop for schools" (Buckley & Schneider, 2003) as outsiders and are constrained by demands on their time, energy, and resources. Enrolling children in a desirable school tends to require work, insider knowledge, and additional resources (Andre-Bechely, 2013; Ball et al., 1995; Pattillo, 2015). While districts may have some means of helping families learn

how to navigate school decisions, many parents recognize they are responsible for their child's school access and the attendant tasks of touring and researching schools (Pattillo, 2014; Potterton, 2020).

Earlier on, I conducted a pilot study in Washington, D.C. to better understand how parents who are choosing schools draw on their relationships with school personnel to learn about their options for next-school selection. In this study (Saltmarsh, 2022), many of the parents with whom I spoke were desperate for insight about schools and had to rely on incomplete or flawed sources to get it. When asked what knowledge was most valuable for his search, a father in this study asserted, "all information is good information," and further explained, "we've been looking at schools for years because if you wait until eighth grade [to find a high school], you're too late." Another parent shared how her search for a preschool began when her daughter turned two. She recalled, "I pretty much lived on the [district] website, I kept checking scores. I just kept checking Great Schools." For these parents, it made sense to look for schools early. Certain types of information, like teacher-student interactions and the quality of special programs, were especially useful and frustratingly hard for parents to find. One mother reported asking personnel at her child's school, "Where have the children gone who have similar disabilities as my daughter?" and, in response, heard "crickets," or no official guidance. As a middle school vice principal, this parent and her partner were relatively comfortable conducting a school search. Other parents were not, and one single parent with whom I spoke painted a different picture. "I have to do a lot of the footwork on my own. It's a lot. It's frustrating using leave to take off [work] to visit schools." Raised in Virginia and new to the DC school landscape, this mother worried that her child could be poorly educated or unsafe if she failed to secure a preferred placement. Others feared that schools were purposely misleading them, with one mother of a

kindergartener sharing, “If you have a school-aged child they [local schools] just go up a list and start calling people. But a lot of them have really bad ratings. They just need people to come to their school so they can get funding.” In each instance above, simply pursuing self-interest may not have converted into positive outcomes for individuals or others. Schools largely continue to control much of the relevant information, creating an insider-outsider dynamic that frustrated many of the parents I spoke with and stifles efficient choice.[2]

Under certain conditions, public-school choice programs empower families to leave a failing or poorly funded school and select one that’s better aligned to their interests (Harris, 2020). Releasing students from residence-based school assignments, these programs create opportunities for students to attend preferred charter, public, magnet, or even private schools, which are particularly valuable for families who are financially unprepared to pay tuition or relocate (Chubb & Moe, 1990). At best, individual choices may permit working-class and parents of color additional opportunities to advocate for their children’s education and, in aggregate, may increase options and improve outcomes as competitive pressures between schools impose market discipline (Figlio & Hart, 2011). The pervasiveness of these neoliberal beliefs within public education is evident in the assumption of school personnel who contend families should be “free to choose” (Wells et al., 2002) and parents who assert they have a “right” (Scott, 2013) to select their child’s school.

From a neoliberal perspective, choice programs cast parents as educational “consumers” (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014, p. 487) and leave it up to individual families to discover and seize educational opportunities regardless of their access to detailed information or their preparation to participate in a complex marketplace. Functionally, the likelihood of obtaining a higher quality

[2] The majority of parents in this study were low-income families of color.

education remains tied to families' ability to navigate school choice contexts (Cobb & Glass, 2009; Makris, 2018), and disproportionate benefits accrue to those able to access and act on school information (Loeb & Valant, 2019). Glossing over inequalities and ignoring families' cultural, racial, geographic, and economic differences, as many choice policies have (Cooper, 2007; Pattillo, 2015; Scott, 2013), serves only the savviest consumers, who tend to be middle class and White (Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2018; Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 1996). Hence, researchers acknowledge, "A wide gulf exists between the policy talk about 'school choice' in the U.S. and the realities of who gets to make beneficial educational choices" (Ben Porath, 2021, p. 11).

Information availability is crucial for school decisions. I understand school information to mean any data or knowledge about institutions or enrollment processes that families consider while making decisions about their children's education. Depending on one's theoretical approach, knowledge helps families determine the "best school" (Bast & Walberg, 2004), or the "fit" with a range of options, or characteristics that eliminate or include institutions in a choice set. Survey and experimental studies suggest that parents update their beliefs about educational institutions when more information is made available (Barrows et al. 2016; Clinton & Grissom 2015; Schneider et al. 2018). Existing research finds that parents are more likely to opt for highly rated schools (Cohodes et al, 2022; Valant & Weixler, 2022) and students are likely to improve academic performance when information about school quality is available during school selection (Hastings & Weinstein, 2008). Improvement in academic performance is a sign of how a healthy market should work. However, some researchers observe that school decisions are highly "malleable" (Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018, p. 64), noting that "even subtle changes can nudge parents toward choosing one type of school or another simply by varying the presentation of information" (Glazerman et al., 2018; Valant & Weixler, 2022). If parents can be nudged simply

by the minor changes in presentation, it may be a sign they are making imprudent decisions based on over-generalized data. Concerning these studies, it is important to note that researchers know much more about the *use* of information in school choices than they do about its provision or accessibility.

Information asymmetries arise from a variety of causes. Since families tend to leverage knowledge from social networks to make school decisions, uneven sources of social capital equip them with more or less advantageous information (Corcoran & Jennings, 2019; Ball & Vincent, 1998; Bader et al., 2019). Some studies underscore the "labor of choice" involved in researching schools, strategizing, negotiating school procedures, and interacting with personnel, and note that Black and Latinx families and single mothers may have comparatively less time to devote to these tasks (Andre-Bechely, 2013; Pattillo, 2015;). Access to formal information schools and districts disseminate is another potential barrier (Delale-O'Connor, 2019). Even parents who are experienced with local schools and highly motivated to search may struggle to obtain materials published in languages besides English (Mavrogordato & Harris, 2017) or to find details about special education programs (McKittrick et al., 2020). These information asymmetries contribute to school enrollment inequalities (Cohodes et al., 2022; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015).

Decades after the first school choice policies, some observers no longer consider information access "the Achilles' heel of choice" (Bridge, 1978; Delale-O'Connor, 2019); instead, they view structural constraints that prevent families from attending desirable schools (such as the irregular placement of schools of choice and exclusionary admissions practices) as a more intractable set of problems (Condliffe, Boyd & DeLuca, 2015; Denice & Gross, 2016; Torres, 2021). In contrast to "demand side" issues like information, these studies shed light on

the uneven supply of schools and realistic opportunities to access them, suggesting that such barriers make choice little more than a "chimera" (Makris, 2018, p. 411). Studies of systemic constraints examine the location of schools using spatial analysis (Lee & Lubienski, 2021; Yoon, 2020); families' relative access to transportation (Bierbaum, Karner & Barjas, 2021); school leaders' receptiveness to special education and emergent bilingual students (Mavrogordato & Stein, 2015); centralized lottery and enrollment systems (Monarrez & Chien, 2021); and entrance exams (Sartain & Barrow, 2020). However, from families' standpoint, information problems and supply-side constraints may be part of the same problem. Devising a viable choice set requires knowledge of relative school availability and limitations on access. If parents could gain awareness of some of these barriers, they may find workarounds or other options. When parents better understand their nuanced and unequal school landscapes, they have somewhat greater agency to make deliberative decisions in light of real options and restrictions. Thus, addressing information asymmetries remains important in structuring school choice policies that potentially allow families to access schools they view as more desirable than those tied to their geographic zones.

Over the past decade, school districts have made information far more accessible in response to federal accountability reform pressures (Lovenheim, 2018; Burnette, 2017). At the same time, the character of data has shifted as districts have narrowed school performance outcomes to a handful of ratings or categories published on websites or manuals (Stein & Nagro, 2015).[3] Wider exposure to concise information would presumably benefit families. Still, studies show that parents searching for schools are finicky or sensitive to the framing and provision of

[3] On one hand, these valuable shortcuts provide a basic level of information, recognizing that families make decisions by satisficing and employing bounded rationality instead of pursing "perfect information," as theory indicates (Simon, 1997; Chen, 2019). Far from full information, parents not only rely on shortcuts but may be happier for doing so as some studies link greater satisfaction with choices to obtaining less information (Lay, 2016).

information (Glazerman et al., 2020). Survey and experimental research have shown that simplified and readable information can change parents' minds. Conveyed through targeted lists of schools, text messages, website graphics, and parent testimonials, these data influence school choices and lead, in some cases, toward student enrollment in higher-rated schools (Cohodes et al., 2022; Corcoran et al., 2018; Hastings & Weinstein, 2008; Valant & Weixler, 2022). At the same time, such "information interventions" (Corcoran, et al., 2018) tend to depersonalize decisions, ignoring aspects like trust, word-of-mouth communication and customization that are perhaps more costly or complex to replicate.

This project offers additional insight into the preferences and needs of parents around types of information and assistance, and the possibility that different social groups benefit from different interventions, as several studies have speculated (Haderlein, 2021; Potterton, 2020; Rowe & Lubienski, 2016). We have limited research about personalized assistance with school choice, as when middle school guidance counselors help families with high school selections (Jochim et al., 2019). The few studies that do exist indicate that underserved families are responsive to more direct, tailored support with school choices (Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018; Haxton, 2010). Beyond shedding new light on the complex role of information in parents' decision processes, this study examines nonprofit organizations' assistance with school choices. We know that Navigator services target low-income families who are navigating school selection processes in at least 14 U.S. cities (Heyward et al., 2020; Jochim et al., 2019), but few empirical studies have examined *how* nonprofit Navigator organizations inform and assist parents as they make school decisions for their children, and particularly whether cultural brokers with insider

knowledge of schools, expertise, and legitimacy in the community actually assist families with school selection (Heyward et al., 2020).[4]

The nature of these partnerships, the kinds of information they incorporate, and parents' perspectives of what this assistance provides require further study. I seek to learn whether personalized support with school selection from NGO Navigators is particularly beneficial to parents in contrast to simpler information interventions and may be workable on a broader scale. To investigate these issues, we would need to know what these NGOs provide in terms of information and assistance (i.e., tools, access to others, time, willingness to build relationships with families) and how they do so; what supports parents are seeking; whether parents believe they are getting what they need or want; and if there are opportunities to expand the service or transfer valuable aspects of what they do to other entities. In this study I seek to characterize what these NGOs do and evaluate its merit by drawing on the experiences of Navigators, a parent, and other stakeholders, but not from the perspective of a credible sample of parents who partner with the NGO. I highlight the relative uniqueness of NGO Navigators' information support from organization's standpoint in relation to school and district personnel and identify ways that this approach to personalized information and assistance could be scaled up, according to key informants, to have a substantive impact on school access.

This study investigates one nonprofit, EdNavigator (EN), in New Orleans, Louisiana and its advisors, which they call Navigators, as partners in school selection using in-depth interviews with parents, members of the NGO, and other stakeholders, and explores ways that elementary- and middle- school parents find and experience support in choosing their child's next school.

[4] NGOs occupy a unique position in that they are autonomous and do not operate as a top-down bureaucracy as market advocates might worry. At same time, they aim to systematize useful school information. Their combination of access to schools and independence may provide them with a unique perspective on educational quality in area schools.

EdNavigator is one of many nonprofit organizations in New Orleans that aim to improve youth education and wellbeing. Along with the Urban League, it performs a unique role in a market-style school system by seeking to improve student access to schools by connecting families with school information. Unlike the Urban League, EN equips families who work at select employers with personal advisors who assist with a range of education matters between Pre-K and college. Recently update, the NGO's mission is to "empower every family in the U.S. with access to affordable, high quality support along the path to a great education" (EdNavigator.org).

The study is guided by the following questions:

1. What does EdNavigator think parents need in terms of information and assistance with selecting their school of choice, and how do they support parents in obtaining what they think parents need?
2. According to participants, where might there be opportunities to systematize or scale-up these interventions?

This exploratory analysis is guided by certain sensitizing notions related to market theory, social and cultural capital, which reflect the resources that parents make use of in choice processes, and personalized assistance with school decisions. Market theory posits that independent consumers will secure information that enables them to make optimal decisions; while this thinking forms the basis for district approaches to school choice, such assumptions about parents' rational processes, motivation to maximize outcomes, and autonomy presume an outlay of time, resources, skills, and engagement. For some underserved families, these assumptions about participating and holding required institutional forms of knowledge are not born out in practice (Ben Porath & Johanek; Brown, 2021; Ellison & Aloe, 2019; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020). Notions of social and cultural capital help shed light on resources parents call on to

make school decisions, as these sources of capital can equip parents with school information or, in some cases, make it more useful. Researchers have used these forms of capital to identify how inequitable processes and outcomes play out in the context of school choice programs. To counteract a misleading expectation that all families may benefit simply from having a choice of schools, researchers have begun to explore forms of assistance with school decisions that counselors, consultants, and NGO Navigators may provide. Generally, this approach to information support reduces information about options and enrollment processes, offers advice (usually pertaining to schools with higher test scores or district ratings), and customizes contact to families' preferred modes of communication (Heyward et al., 2020, Jochim et al., 2019; Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018).

Findings here offer potential contributions to future research, policy, and practice. The study explores new roles for non-governmental organizations in school choices, and it adds depth and nuance to our understanding of NGOs' parental support. Second, this research deepens our knowledge about the needs and preferences of parents in school choice policy conversations, which often stem from theoretical notions of rational behavior. As parents are underrepresented actors in district policymaking (Ishimaru, 2019), research should examine policies that investigate parents' needs and experiences and seek to foreground their voices. Districts hoping to design information supplements to counter asymmetries will benefit from clearer, context-based narratives of parents' school choices. Third, this analysis extends scholarship on information supports, adding insight on school transition assistance derived through qualitative inquiry. Investigating these matters of equity and educational access in New Orleans, where market-based education reforms are uniquely mature, may offer a worthwhile addition to our knowledge of choice policies in emerging policy contexts.

In the following chapter, I explain theoretical notions that guide the study including types of capital, certain market principles, and assistance with school decisions; review research related to school selection in PK-12 "choice" contexts and NGO Navigators' involvement; and examine problems of information availability and inequities tied to navigating school choice processes. Then, in Chapter 3, I describe this exploratory case study design, highlight matters of context and participant characteristics, and detail my processes for data analysis and drawing conclusions. I present study findings in Chapter 4 and contend that one-on-one support in the case of EN contributes unique forms of school-related and interpersonal knowledge that draw parents into school decisions. In Chapter 5, I connect problems of policy and research detailed in Chapter 2 to the findings in Chapter 4 by discussing the contributions and implications, as well as the limitations, of this study. I provide a cogent conclusion in Chapter 6 that highlights the importance of relational school decisions particularly for some underserved parents and the unique role of and tensions around NGO-based information support for school selection.

Chapter 2: Literature Base

The following chapter discusses empirical and theoretical findings relevant to this study. The first section traces the emergence of school choice policies and examines concepts of capital, markets, and inequality as they apply to school choice.[5] The second section discusses what we presently know about the kinds of information parents can secure, clarifying the problem of inequitable access to useful school information as well as researchers' and policy matters' attempts to combat it. The third section investigates mediated school choices, personalized information, and the knowledge and assistance NGOs provide as topics of ongoing research. Together, these sections inform my data collection and analysis, situate this study in the context of analogous research (i.e., providing intellectual context for the discussion section), provide a rationale for this case study, and suggest subsequent lines of inquiry.

Part I – Background and Theoretical Constructs

Prominence of School Choice Policies. Over the past three decades, parental choice and charter schools have become a centerpiece in large urban districts' efforts to reduce racial and class-based inequities and to improve access to high-quality educational opportunities for underserved students (Lee & Lubienski, 2021; Berends, 2021). Dubbed "the new normal" (Campbell, Heyward & Gross, 2017), choice reforms are intended to empower parents and improve school quality by fostering competitive pressures between schools that boost their productive efficiency (Ellison & Aloe, 2019; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Bast & Walberg, 2004). The

[5] As an exploratory analysis, this study does not have a theoretical framework but begins with orienting concepts (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Yin, 2013), in this case, that underlay issues of information and assistance for school selection.

expansion of choice programs is particularly robust in urban districts (Irwin et al., 2021), and is highlighted by the finding that almost thirty percent of US students now attend a school other than their neighborhood school (Snyder, de Brey & Dillow, 2019).

Navigating school decisions may have weighty and enduring consequences. Nield (2005) describes these decision points as "critical junctures in students' educational careers" (p. 274). In many urban contexts, these choice programs are a gateway for student transfers, initial entry into schools, or promotion to middle or high school. Realistically, parents' choices are often constrained by a limited number of high-quality schools (Makris, 2018). Still, studies indicate that the quality of a school to which a child gains access may significantly affect students' long-run educational attainment and quality of life (Bloom & Unterman, 2014; Deming et al., 2011). In New Orleans, where "choice" reforms have contributed to greater racial and class-based desegregation and a hierarchy of public schools, researchers find that student grades and disciplinary records are substantially shaped by their school assignments (Adamson, Cook-Harvey & Darling-Hammond, 2015). Moreover, enrollment in below average schools makes it more difficult for impoverished and other underserved students to close educational gaps (Spears, 2011). High-quality early learning experiences give rise to new ways of thinking about oneself and the world (Howe, 1993; Fishkin, 2014), and studies document the long run effects of teachers and schools on students' earnings and quality of life (Chetty, Friedman & Rockoff, 2011). From this perspective, public schools that function poorly not only underserve low-income and racially minoritized students in the present, but potentially impact their future development. Since the possession of education credentials serves as a gateway to social mobility (Labaree, 1997), students are increasingly impelled to have high school and college degrees to become economically successful (Schanzenbach et al., 2017). This mandate to attain

certain degrees and skills, then, represents a "bottleneck" (Fishkin, 2014) that blocks those without them from future career opportunities. Therefore, we should carefully examine the mechanisms that determine educational access for students in many major US cities.

Origin of Choice Policies in the US. Broadly construed, Americans have always exercised educational choice, though the particular schooling alternatives and related public policies have taken various forms. Wealthier families had their children attend fee-based schools in the 1700's, particularly in areas outside of the Northeast and prior to the emergence of the Common School movement across the North in the 1830s (Glenn, 1988; Kaestle, 1983). Although parochial and private schools were well established in the 1800s, courts reinforced their legitimacy in the early and middle of the 1900s amidst widespread nativism, anti-Catholic sentiment, and skepticism of private schooling and "private ideas" (Tyack, 1968, p. 85; Gross, 2017). In *Pierce vs. the Society of Seven Sisters* (1925) the Court upheld the property investments of private school providers and "the liberty of parents and guardians to direct the upbringing and education of children" (*Pierce*, 1925). Notably, the Court underscored, "the child is not the mere creature of the state," though it reinforced state regulatory powers, stating, "No question is raised concerning the power of the State reasonably to regulate all schools, to inspect, supervise and examine them, their teachers and pupils." As with later Supreme Court decisions, this case contributed to legal and popular perception that parents were entitled to express their liberty and commitment to their child's education through school placement (Tyack, 1968).[6]

The direct antecedents of school choice as we know it – open enrollment, financial subsidies and savings accounts for students to attend a private school, and public schools of

[6] One such case is *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, which decided that Cleveland's voucher program did not violate the Constitution's Establishment Clause because the benefits of the program went to individuals to exercise their choice between secular and religious schools.

choice like charters, magnets, or traditional public schools that are part of intra-district option plans – lie in 1950's resistance to the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. School choice became a vehicle for southern states and school districts to nominally accept but substantively ignore the order to desegregate schools "with all deliberate speed," as the Court decreed. Many white families exited the public system and enrolled in private and religious "segregation academies" while districts like New Kent County, Virginia offered "freedom of choice" plans, which technically allowed White and Black students to transfer between schools, though very few did in practice. Additionally, White and mostly segregationist Southern leaders advocated for increased public funding for private schools (in the form of grants and vouchers) to dodge integration mandates (Hale, 2021; Ravitch, 2010). This historical tradition of division and racism was the context in which school choice programs were enacted (Jabbar, 2015; Waitoller, 2020).

Sidestepping the segregationist legacy of these programs and hot-button issue of public funding for religious educational programs, Nobel Laureate economist Milton Friedman made a case for subsidizing private and public schools parents wished to send their children to in his 1962 book, *Capitalism and Freedom*. Friedman advocated universal choice on the grounds that greater economic freedom was tied to greater political freedom, and he argued that allowing parents to vote with their feet would more appropriately fund (and defund) schools since allocation would be tied to student enrollment. In theory, institutions would be forced to become more responsive to families' educational needs and preferences in order to attract and retain students. Market reforms suggested additional benefits, as well. Friedman (1962) explains,

> The denationalization of education would widen the range of choice available to parents. Given, as at present, that parents can send their children to government schools without

> special payment, very few can or will send them to other schools unless they too are subsidized…. Let [a] subsidy be made available to parents regardless where they send their children--provided only that it be to schools that satisfy specified minimum standards--and a wide variety of schools will spring up to meet the demand. (p. 93)

Friedman offered the restaurant industry's health and safety inspections as the desirable "minimum standards" for government involvement in an otherwise open market for schooling. Along with district and school leaders, parents would become the arbiters of school quality and desired purposes under this plan. Because "a subsidy" would no longer be required to select schools, the system would improve equality by extending school decisions to those who were bound to attend default public schools given the costs of doing otherwise (Betts, 2005; Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Until the early 1980's and the election of Ronald Reagan, school choice programs "remained far outside the mainstream" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 118) given limited support for voucher programs or public funding for parochial schools. Experiments with vouchers generally failed, although some did take hold. The Wisconsin legislature established the first voucher program in Milwaukee in 1990 targeting low-income students. Washington, D.C. and thirteen states would later create similar programs. Cambridge, Massachusetts formed an open enrollment program in the 1970s then later transitioned to a "controlled choice" plan aimed at maintaining racial and income-based integration. Moss (2019) explains that the district sought to redistribute students who had obtained transfers back to their zoned schools and, in doing so, provoked "deafening" (p. 340) opposition from the largely Harvard and MIT university community. Another vehicle for school choice, charter schools, held greater promise politically.[7] These iterations of school

[7] Beginning with the Clinton Administration, past presidential administrations have endorsed the expansion of charters with Barack Obama leveraging the reduction of state caps on charters as a favored strategy under Race to

choice proceeded from several timely sources of political influence. Ladd (1996) notes that support grew out of demands of civil rights groups to improve failing public schools or, in other cases, from parents who sought "to escape the public system" (Cucchiara, 2015 p. 168), rather than being consigned to resource-scarce, nearby schools.[8] Secondly, choice and charters advanced under a nationwide shift toward a "new educational accountability" (Elmore, Abelman, & Furman,1996) that was enshrined in America 2000, Goals 2000, and No Child Left Behind. These standards-based versions of accountability sought to refocus policy from inputs (e.g., dollars or services) to outputs (e.g., student standardized test scores) by, for instance, changing accreditation criteria from meeting compliance standards to meeting mandated student performance goals (Elmore et al.,1996), and (in the case of No Child Left Behind) prioritizing school choice as an alternative to public schools that failed to demonstrate improvement.

Charters expanded quickly, tripling their enrollment between 2005-06 and 2020-21 and serving seven percent of all public-school students by 2023.[9] Henig (2008) contends, "More due to accident than design, to opportunistic politics than grand strategy, charter schools emerged as the surrogate to vouchers as the battleground on which the market versus government conflict would be staged" (p. 42). Popularized by Albert Shanker, charter schools began as laboratories for pedagogical experimentation aimed at providing teachers seeking more professional autonomy.[10] However, most charters did not develop as outlets for creative educational approaches. With the first charter law in 1991, Minnesota enacted a version of institutional

The Top. The Biden Administration seeks to prevent federal funding from supporting for-profit charter organizations and requires the solicitation of community input prior to installing new charters, but they largely maintain support for this approach (Department of Education, 2023). Although, charter schools have shifted from bipartisan to largely conservative political backing.

[8] Political action groups like the Black Alliance for Educational Opportunities argued that educational choice was a right that all parents are entitled to (Scott, 2013).

[9] National Alliance for Public Charter Schools is the source.

[10] Shanker withdrew support and became a vociferous critic by 1993.

autonomy and teacher voice that, ironically, removed collective bargaining rights, professional licensure, and legal protections from the district contract (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2015). Charters also drew wealthy private funders in what Scott (2009) described as the "politics of venture philanthropy." Several foundations such as Gates, Bradley, Walton, Broad, and Fisher spent "unprecedented public and private resources… to expand particular forms of school choice [namely, charter schools] in the name of educational equity" (p. 132).

Charter schools and school choice in general, seem to benefit from a rare coupling of what John Kingdon (1986) calls problems, politics, and policy streams. Several problems including lagging performance on international assessments, achievement gaps, and a concern that school districts were monopolies that thwarted innovation favored charter schools as a potential policy solution. In 1990, Chubb and Moe helped renew Friedman's arguments about the capacity of the free market to improve public education with their book, *Politics, Market's, and America's Schools*. They argued that the governance structure of public schools was unresponsive to change and that it would inevitably change by extending far more choice to families.[11] Like Friedman, they saw choice as a "panacea" that would generate a wide variety of schools.

Choice and market competition are supposed to engender certain systemic improvements. By putting school selection "directly in the hands of parents" (Viteritti, 1999, p. 212), decisions may trigger institutional competition that improves the productive efficiency of all schools (Friedman, 1962; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hart & Figlio, 2011) and channel students into schools better suited to their interests and abilities (Gill & Booker, 2008). A contemporary proponent of

[11] Offshoots of this policy plan include various open enrollment systems, tax deductions for homeschooled or privately schooled children, scholarship programs for low- and middle-income families to attend non-public schools, no caps on charters or other schools of choice, and school scholarship tax credit programs.

market-based reform, Herbert Walberg (2007), explains that competition "forces all providers to raise their effectiveness and efficiency. When choice is present, government schools must either become more productive and satisfying to parents or risk losing students and the funding that is tied to their average daily attendance" (p. 49). By design, underperforming schools would eventually close. However, higher performing schools would benefit not only their own students, but also those at other institutions since they might function as learning laboratories that disseminate effective practices (Fryer, 2014) and spur surrounding schools to improve their own productive efficiency, in addition to other potential spillover effects (Hart & Figlio, 201).[12]

Market reforms rely on several key assumptions. First, individuals are believed to behave independently as rational, self-interested consumers who optimize their decisions by comparing the quality of their options (Loeb & Valant, 2019). Coleman (1990) writes, "a rational actor will engage in a search for information before deciding" (p. 14). Ideally, choices will be based on perfect or full information about the supply of options to ensure the "best" enrollment decision. [13] Realistically, rational decisions using full information are unlikely for a host of reasons that include the volume of relevant school data and the difficulty of obtaining and evaluating so much information (Ben Porath, 2009). More often, individuals take shortcuts and trust certain sources more than others, a type of bounded rationality that limits (if it does not discredit) the market metaphor (Bell, 2009).

[12] Although, Friedman did acknowledge greater potential for abuse under a system where schools had the power to selectively admit students.

[13] The availability of information can play a decisive role in market function while inaccessible information may contribute to market failure. Research in the parent field of economics highlights the harm of information asymmetries among consumers (Stiglitz, 2009; Cohen & Winn, 2007; Stiglitz, 2002*)* and shows that imperfect information inhibits productive competition. Without government intervention to mediate unequally distributed information, markets function inefficiently (Stiglitz, 2009). Economists realize that consumers can never have "perfect" information, but government can intervene to lower the cost of acquiring and interpreting information so that more consumers are likely to make better decisions.

Years of implementation suggest that, beyond the intrinsic appeal of increasing students' options, choice policies appear to modestly improve academic outcomes. The trouble is that they do so for some students more than others, while the variation in types of school choice programs (charter schools, magnet schools, vouchers, intra-district choice, etc.) complicate comparisons further. Some studies indicate parity between charter schools and traditional public schools (Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, & Branch, 2007), while others suggest charters tend to raise high school graduation rates and standardized test scores (Harris & Chen, 2022) and have the most positive effects on student achievement in urban spaces (Chabrier, Cohodes, & Oreopoulos 2016). The impact of charters varies across states and types of charters (charter management organization [CMO] vs. standalone, virtual vs. brick and mortar, profit vs. non-profit) but the overall, modest comparative benefits of charters on student achievement (CREDO, 2015) suggest that some families benefit from systems of open enrollment and alternatives to traditional public schools.[14] However, researchers express concern that charters may "skim" higher performing students and serving fewer students with more costly educational needs, and thus that performance studies do not entail "apples to apples" student comparisons. Adamson, Cook-Harvey, and Darling-Hammond (2015) write, "Studies on the effects of the New Orleans reforms on student achievement vary substantially in their conclusions based on the metrics and comparisons used" (p. 6). In short, choice and charters have become characteristic parts of urban school landscapes, but they have struggled to raise educational quality overall and have had disparate effects on various students (Ben Porath & Johanek, 2019).

[14] The majority of charters are independent "standalone" (Woodworth et al., 2017) operations that hold their own charter and operate as a single or one of a pair of schools; they are nonprofit organizations in which 68% of charter students attend. CMO's operate the second largest segment of students. CMO's are nonprofit organizations that hold their numerous schools' charters. Vendor Operated Schools (VOS's) are another cluster led by organizations that provide a range of services to charters through contracts; they may lead for-profit or non-profit schools.

The growth of school choice has accompanied social stratification by class and race (Alcaino, M., & Jennings, 2020; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011; Garcia, 2008; Kotok, Frankenberg, Schafft, Mann, & Fuller, 2017; Roda & Wells, 2013), and these programs do not benefits students across race, ethnicity, class, or ability types evenly. One explanation is that low-income students and those requiring the most expensive services, like English language learners or special education students, tend to remain in traditional public schools at higher rates than their peers (Buckley & Schneider 2005; Mavrogordato & Harris, 2017), while numerous other studies document how schools of choice deliberately exclude underserved students at the point of admission (Bergman & McFarlin, 2018; Lubienski, Gulosino & Wietzel, 2009; Jabbar, 2015b). Another explanation is the tendency for many parents to select schools on the basis of factors other than school quality, such as race or proximity to White and affluent areas (Renzulli & Evans, 2005), or based upon student demographics rather than student performance on standardized tests (Abdulkadiroglu, Pathak, Schellenberg & Walters, 2020). The range and depth of critiques call into question whether choice policies can improve equality in urban schools or whether they simply mask deeper social and economic inequalities.

Insofar as school choice systems neglect the way that race, ethnicity, or culture impact school access, they may further disadvantage students of color and low-income families (Pattillo, 2015; Pedroni, 2007; Rodriguez, 2022; Sattin-Bajaj, 2016). Although choice policies are ostensibly neutral across differences of race, ethnicity, income, and gender (Cooper, 2007), subtle inequalities in the cultural, social, and political capital necessary for enrollment suggest the persistence of racial and economic disadvantage (Lipman, 2013; Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz,

1996; Brantlinger, 2003; Reay, 2004; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014; Yoon, 2016).[15] Worse, the appearance of neutrality implies that parents have no one to blame but themselves for not securing desirable school enrollment for their children. Instead of this presumed neutrality, Corcoran et al. (2018) suggest that education policies should instead begin with an "unequal consumers" expectation. Overall, in contexts where unseen labor and time facilitate school access, families may struggle to make effective use of the opportunity to select schools.

Sensitizing Notions for This Study

This section examines key factors concerning market demand (related to individuals) and supply (related to institutions) that influence the way families experience school choice and make use of information about schools. I begin with the demand side, recognizing that "consumers" make "positioned choices" (Cooper, 2007) that are contingent upon their socioeconomic status, social and cultural capital, education levels, and other factors.[16] I then identify several structural factors, such as school location, seat availability, and transportation that influence students' school enrollment opportunities. In many instances, these factors mediate the availability, relevance, and parental use of school information.

Choice programs tend to position families, on the demand side, as independent educational consumers freely and equally capable of securing information and navigating a vast educational landscape (Wells, Slayton & Scott, 2002; Scott, 2013). The responsibilities of school selection include identifying and researching schooling options (Ben Porath & Johanek, 2019),

[15] In one illustration of Cambridge, MA school district's conversion to open enrollment, Moss (2019) reports that politically powerful middle class and affluent families viewed expansions of school choice as "seductive" (p. 319; Minow, 2011).

[16] This positioned choice notion echoes Karl Mannheim's (1949) perspective on the sociology of knowledge generally, which suggests such individual decisions should be examined in connection with social, political, and economic forces since knowledge and experience in a particular context are intimately connected.

decoding institutional rules and practices; strategizing opportunities and contingencies (Lareau, Evans & Yee, 2016), and establishing relationships with school and district personnel (Sattin-Bajaj & Jennings, 2020). Across race and class, families may find the pressure of navigating school decisions to be "intense, emotionally stressful, malleable, cyclical, and ongoing" (Potterton, 2020, p. 167) where parents continue to strive for an "unreachable summit" (p. 182), or better school placement. The relative burden of school selection, which varies between families, can shape families' experiences of finding and enrolling in schools.

In practice, families' different resources – whether cultural, racial, geographic, economic, social, or logistical – predispose them to different types of information and educational options (Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 1995; Ben Porath & Johanek, 2019; Bell, 2009).[17] School selection processes present barriers to those who do not have the privilege of a flexible schedule, reliable transportation, full health, or other forms of support (André-Bechely, 2013; Ben Porath 2021; Patillo et al., 2015). Studies underscore the "labor of choice" that weighs more heavily on Black and Latinx families and single mothers who may have comparatively less time or income to devote to these tasks (Andre-Bechely, 2013; Brown, 2021; Pattillo, 2015). Moreover, regardless of racial, ethnic or class backgrounds, these costs, some hidden and others explicit, often become "motherwork," as mothers absorb the duties of performance monitoring and school searching (Brown, 2021; Cooper, 2007; Haley-Lock & Posey Maddox, 2016; Patillo, 2015). Researchers observe that families possessing certain skills, knowledge, and attitudes consistent with dominant social groups are more favorably positioned to invest in this work (Heyward et al., 2020), while a body of literature details the ways that parents strategically mobilize resources in the form of

[17] Families with more economic resources have always had the opportunity to choose their school by relocating to a desirable school zone or district, what Reay (2004) calls, "choice by mortgage" (p. 81). The residence-based system preceding "school choice" programs still regulates school decisions for 73 percent of US students (Weinenger, 2014).

cultural, social, and political capital to help them obtain school enrollment (Ball, 1993; Brantlinger, 2003; Reay, 2004; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014; Yoon, 2020). Largely concealed, advantages like extra time, insider knowledge, and social connections grant some parents greater access to successful schools, none of which accord with the rational actor model.

Several researchers have used theories of capital (i.e., social, cultural, economic, and political capital) to understand school choice programs in practice (Brantlinger, 2003; Bell, 2009, Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020; Yoon, 2020). I draw on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who developed capital theory to explain persistent differences in status or wealth (Yoon, 2020). Broadly, the theory suggests that educational institutions maintain a stratified social order as schools reward and extend students' uneven endowments of cultural, social, and economic capital, reproducing inequalities unrelated to students' will, ability, or intellect (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Specific forms of capital can be converted into others, Bourdieu argues, as "every type of capital is reducible in the last analysis to economic capital" (Bourdieu, 1983 p. 252). While Bourdieu never addresses school choice directly, his theories have gained traction in related scholarship due to the seminal work of sociologists like Stephen Ball, Richard Bowe, and Sharon Gewirtz, who analyze class-based school choice dynamics in the United Kingdom. Subsequent scholars have extended their findings to other institutional arrangements (Lareau, Evans & Ye, 2016; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020), geographic contexts (Wu, 2012; Van Zanten & Kosunen, 2013), and issues pertaining to capital (Yoon, 2016; Trevena, McGhee & Heath, 2016).[18]

[18] Evaluations of school choice practices in which researchers use notions of cultural, social, and political capital span international boundaries. Across these contexts, studies shed light on the way choice policies create new contests over educational goods and future opportunity pathways, nominally open to all families but disproportionately benefiting whites, native language speakers, and higher- or middle-income parents.

Cultural capital exists in three versions: 1) embodied, which includes talents like artistic ability that garner respect; 2) material, which includes tangible objects like artwork considered to be valuable; and 3) institutionalized, which includes credentials like degrees and certifications that suggest institutional approval. In the context of schools, Wells and Serna (1996) write, "Students are frequently rewarded for their taste, and for the cultural knowledge that informs it" (p. 32).[19] A recent study by Cartwright (2022) illustrates how one's racial position also influences their perceived level of cultural capital, as students of color in her study who were viewed by Whites as nonthreatening were deemed to have more cultural capital. One way that cultural capital is exercised in educational settings is through habitus, a deeply internalized form of cultural capital that manifests in individuals' tastes, routinized behaviors (Reay, 1988). Habitus suggests that individuals act predictably in given circumstances since cultural attributes are like one's "second nature," guiding judgments and behavior.

Bourdieu defines social capital as "the mobilization of actual or potential resources, which are linked to possession of a durable network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 248). The value of social capital depends upon the robustness of relationships, the likelihood of activating connections, and the volume of allies' economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Scholars have further developed this theory, articulating how capital can be drawn from one's peer networks (Putnam, 2000), positional authority within social structures (Lin, 2001), and sense of in-group racial solidarity (Orr, 1999). Since connections vary in strength and purpose, forms of social capital differ in their function and potency. Researchers have distinguished between "bonding," the type of advantages

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gained from close, consistent relationships, and "bridging," more peripheral ties that help individuals tap into new networks or access individuals with different cultures (Putnam, 2000; Larson, 2004). Foundational views of social capital emphasize social closure and maintaining group norms (Coleman, 1988), though studies show that some institutional actors intentionally use their social capital to empower less-advantaged students and families (Noguera, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Some scholars criticize Bourdieu's theories of capital for dichotomizing ownership of cultural and social wealth and for inaccurately implying that some people simply lack wealth if they do not possess attitudes, knowledge, or values associated with dominant white middle class culture (Yosso, 2005). To the contrary, these critics point out that racially/ethnically minoritized and low-income families have a variety of different forms of capital that dominant groups do not recognize (Valenzuela, 1999; Noguera, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Mercado, 2005; Yosso, 2005). In the context of school choice and capital, it is not that lower socioeconomic status parents do not possess capital, but that institutional practices and expectations around school choice processes favor and reward certain forms of cultural, social, or political capital that these parents tend not to have. Successfully navigating institutional processes requires certain types of social and cultural capital, regardless of the particular characteristics of an ideal school.

To account for an expanded set of observable cultural, familial, and personal strengths and knowledge, this study draws on Yosso's framework of community cultural wealth. Community cultural wealth centers the experiences of communities of color who thrive in oppressive social and economic systems (Yosso, 2005). Her theory provides a lens for identifying sources of aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. Of particular importance here is navigational capital, which focuses on "the skills of

maneuvering through social institutions" (Yosso, 2005, p. 80) that are racially biased and exclusionary. In addition to exposing the normative forms of capital underlying existing choice policies, this project uses community cultural wealth to understand the assets that parents draw on to navigate school choice.[20]

These various forms of capital all implicate school information because, in some cases, capital may impart "information that facilitates action" (Coleman, 1988, p. 104).[21] For example, while families mobilize capital during different phases of school choice (Ball, 2003; Yoon 2020), it is especially important at the outset, as parents attempt to build awareness of schools, leaders and educators, and institutional practices. Studies indicate that social capital may be interwoven through relational experiences (Bell, 2009; Bossetti, 2004; Fleming et al., 2015; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Holme, 2002; Nield, 2005;), and that parent networks are an especially useful medium for gaining knowledge about schools (Alegre, 2012; Nield, 2005). Peer networks often represent trusted sources of information (Altenhofen, Berends & White, 2016), whether they provide data about schools or social comparisons to neighbors, friends, or family members who are selecting schools (Raveaud & Van Zanten, 2007; Ball & Vincent, 1998; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014).

In some cases, teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators are potentially valuable sources of social capital, exposing individuals to new connections with members of different social classes or cultures. These peripheral or "weak ties" (Granovetter, 1983) are circuits along which bridging social capital may occur. Bridging social capital takes place when individuals from different social groups interact "to seek access or support or gain information" (Larsen et

[20] Rather than treating Yosso (2006) and Bourdieu's versions of capital as mutually exclusive as some do, this study views capital through an expanded frame.
[21] More recent empirical studies corroborate the point that parents across income levels tend to seek information and conduct research when selecting schools (Altenhofen et al., 2016; Brown, 2021; Potterton, 2020).

al., 2004, p. 66). In schools, personnel may share resources embedded in their positional authority or other networks “in a strategic and supportive fashion” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1075) to deliberately help empower minoritized students. Such direct support to low income and minoritized families may also improve parent-school relationships in low-income communities (Noguera, 2005).

Forms of cultural capital may also serve as a conduit for obtaining information. Ball (1993) argues that “to be an active and strategic chooser” requires certain types of cultural capital (p. 13). The author identifies strategies like “the ability to maximize choice by working the system, and the ability to engage in activities involving positive presentation of self” as “essential” (p. 13) for capitalizing on school decisions. Effectively working the system may take parents through a range of activities, including “a school tour, talking to people about the school, visiting the school with their child, researching information about the school, gathering thoughts and opinions from spouses/partners and children about the school, and keeping track of the application deadlines” (André-Bechely, 2013, p. 105). As a form of capital, the will and ability to prioritize these events might provide more insight about the quality of the school or how well the child may fit there. At other points in school selection process, like citywide school expositions (Disare, 2016), parents who can readily "decipher and manipulate complex structures" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 73) may be rewarded with richer information.

In their examination of enrollment processes in New York City’s highest-performing public schools, Sattin-Bajaj and Roda (2020) offer vivid examples of the way forms of capital are gateways to school information. The authors contend, “substantial financial and social capital [is] necessary to just stay afloat in the school choice competition” (p. 27). The authors describe New York’s system of choice as multi-step, “cognitively demanding” (p. 22), and time intensive.

Here, parents access selective admissions schools and gifted and talented programs through paid consultants or become "experts" (p. 25) themselves. Additionally, affluent and middle-class parents may pay for expensive tutoring; relocate for residential preference and access to gifted-and-talented feeder schools; assemble student work portfolios; and have their children repeatedly retake gifted and talented screening assessments (Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020). Notably, parents assume the competitive pressures of these processes, understanding them as "unwritten shared protocol" (p. 26). Overall, it is important to acknowledge that families are differently capable of meeting many of these demands like obtaining priority admission status for "showing interest" which families do by visiting the school. Although New York City may be a unique educational context, this narrative clearly conveys the "the gratuitous expenditure of time involved in ensuring [social] reproduction" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 253) that only privileged families can commit to.

Certain forms of capital can also help parents make use of available school information. The value of information is "amplified" (Hutt & Polikoff, 2020, p. 6) by the cultural and social resources parents can mobilize. Through the internet and school or district-distributed materials, parents are exposed to numerous formal sources of information or "cold knowledge" (Ball & Vincent, 1998 p. 377), and the challenges of interpreting and using this information may be steep. Parents may be tasked with differentiating schools based on their policies (Ball, Bowe, Gewirtz, 1996); reading text that is above their reading level (Delale-O'Connor, 2019); utilizing lengthy reference materials (Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020); or navigating district websites (Glazerman, et al., 2018). Furthermore, parents need to decipher between promotional materials and objective information (Jabbar, 2016). Underlying these capabilities are other habits of mind, like a willingness to advocate for oneself in institutional settings (Davies & Aurini, 2008) and

question individuals who speak with "the expert voice" (Alegre & Benito, 2012, p. 862). Thus, if parents are familiar with schools' professional routines and are able to communicate effectively with school-based professionals, they may be better able to advance their interests in school settings (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003).

Conversely, although individuals possess group-based resources, the absence of some types of social and cultural capital may constrain their ability to select schools. Without certain types of cultural, social, or political resources, parents may be left with their initial assessment of the school landscape. Research suggests that families' uneven stores of social capital produce very different opportunities in school choice (Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 1995; Bell, 2009; Perez, 2011). In their study conducted in the United Kingdom, Trevena, McGhee, and Heath (2016) illustrate the value of bonding versus bridging social capital in their explorations of Polish immigrants' school choice experiences. In this study, families turn to homogeneous networks that supply sources of bonding social capital, which may be valuable for sharing peer experiences but tend to be less useful when processes and settings are largely unfamiliar and individuals could benefit from new connections and sources of information (Murray, Domina, Petts, Renzulli & Boylan, 2020). Relying on bonding social capital rather than bridging social capital does not help recent immigrant families obtain valuable insider knowledge about their new school system. Other studies indicate that working class and financially impoverished families face barriers to school information and school access because they don't wield specific forms of social capital or aren't perceived as possessing those forms (Schneider, Teske, Marschall, 2000; Teske et al., 2007).

Several international studies also show that in a competitive field of educational access, possessing certain forms of social capital helps parents at key moments in the choice process by,

for instance, allowing entry into over-enrolled schools. In his study of families' school choice advantages in China, Xiaoxin (2013) reports that middle- and upper-class parents' social connections lead to "choice fee" reductions, helpful "leader's memos" that provide special enrollment permission, and endorsements from head teachers. Similarly, Buyruk's study (2020) of school choice in Ankara, Turkey shows that families who have relationships with local educational organization leaders request "address changes" which entitle their children to attend schools for which they are not zoned. This method is similar to address falsification in the US, an illegal means of selecting a preferred school (Aggarwal, 2014). Taken together, these studies offer international comparisons that reinforce a conceptual thru line in studies of school choice and capital across geographic contexts, that of middle class and affluent families using resource advantages to gain favorable access to schools ostensibly open to all students.[22]

As foundational notions in this study, theories of capital offer insight into how parents obtain and use information and assistance. By acknowledging capital and community cultural wealth, this study is more sensitive to the different ways that relationships and resources guide parents to understand schools as they do. Bourdieu asserted that the mobilization of capital was inherently stratifying, noting that the exercise of these forms of capital explained how schools contribute to social and economic inequalities. However, other scholars observe that families can acquire and use forms capital in school settings to expand underserved students' educational opportunities, essentially redistributing these skills, attitudes, and actions toward equitable access to schools (Sattin-Bajaj, 2015; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). While such redistribution is likely to be

[22] In other cases, information and types of capital may not be so closely connected. Families may not activate available sources of capital during school transitions for various reasons. Fong (2019) observes that families "can draw upon extensive information or none at all, information from any number of sources or none at all" (Fong, 2019, p. 163; Lareau et al., 2016). When families who have options forego school choice, as lower income families tend to do at higher rates than middle- or upper- income peers, having information may be of little consequence (Makris, 2018).

marginal, it is worth exploring how organizational partners share forms of capital in their attempts to "acculturate people to a market" (Chen, 2019, p. 2). No policy interventions will alleviate the problems of school choice, but this study will illuminate one area where markets and school decisions could be significantly fairer.

Scarcity and Capacity Constraints. School districts have made information far more accessible to parents over the past two decades, often in response to federal accountability measures (Burnette, 2017; Lovenheim & Walsh, 2018). These changes assume that publicly available information is both a means to hold schools accountable and a tool for educational access (Clinton & Grissom, 2015; Hutt & Polikoff, 2020). However, school access depends on numerous factors aside from available information, such as transportation, open seats, and the availability of high-quality schools (Bierbaum et al., 2021; Lee & Lubienski, 2021; Monarrez & Chien, 2021). In urban districts where choice policies tend to take root, scarcity of high-performing schools is a salient issue due to patterns of government disinvestment (Hannah-Jones 2016). While proponents of choice policies assert a moral right to choose schools (Scott, 2013; Wells, Slayton & Scott, 2002), and frequently assume that the market will provide a supply of high-quality schools to meet demand, market imperfections and high entry costs can limit the number of providers and, by consequence, many families who participate in choice programs do not gain admission to the schools they prefer (Makris, 2018).

The scarcity of high-quality school options is experienced differently across race, class, and ability due, in part, to factors like the location of schools, presence of transportation, and ability to maneuver through enrollment systems (Waitoller, 2020). Studies indicate that time and distance from home are the primary determinants of school enrollment for many underserved students. For instance, in Washington, D.C., the highest performing schools are concentrated in

affluent neighborhoods like Ward Three, while only four of 36 schools in the lower-income Eighth Ward are high performing (Ryan, 2018). Consequently, the burden of traveling long distances to the city's top schools falls unevenly on students from poorer families (Blagg, Rosenbloom & Chingos, 2018), as it does for Black and Latinx students in New York City and Detroit (Bierbaum, Karner & Barjas, 2021). Edwards (2021) uses a comprehensive data set of enrollment records, addresses and commute times across a five-year span to show that economically disadvantaged students in Detroit have limited access to the highest performing schools.[23] Studies further suggest that in Denver and Chicago, Black and Latinx students live farther from highly rated schools than their white counterparts (Denice & Gross, 2016; Waitoller & Super, 2017) and that in New York City, charter schools are concentrated farther away from lower income families and communities of color (Lee & Lubienski, 2021). Waitoller (2020) illustrates how persistent disinvestment in Chicago neighborhoods where Black students with disabilities are concentrated leads parents to engage in the "politics of desperation" (Stovall, 2013), such that families' school decisions are largely determined by avoiding school buildings that are in poor condition and settings where students' physical safety is threatened. These students attend turnover schools at higher rates and suffer the consequences of closure more than their counterparts in some urban districts like Chicago (Caref et al., 2012; Weber, 2016). Ultimately, fewer schools and greater distances mean that historically underserved students vie for smaller numbers of seats at traditional public schools and high-functioning charters.

Because families' school decisions are confined by systemic constraints like limited number of schools and transportation to them, knowledge about particular schools may seem like a marginal issue. Although school availability is paramount, parental access to actionable

[23] Disadvantaged is the term used by the Michigan Department of Education and by the author.

information remains highly consequential. Useful knowledge about schools may even entail insight on school accessibility and limitations on access to certain schools. Knowledge about schools enables parents to find the best possible outcome with the circumstances they have to work with as families may become more aware of unforeseen barriers or new opportunities. In some cases, information could mean avoiding an undesirable institution, or it might illuminate an attractive niche program.

PART II: Extant Knowledge about the Kinds of Information Parents Can Secure

One source of structural inequities on the demand side involves accessible school information. This section examines what we presently know about the types of information parents can secure, while the remainder of chapter loosely follows the dimensions of school information in Table 1, a typology that derives from Delale-O'Connor's (2019) matrix of formal methods of information dissemination in Chicago.[24]

Table 1:

Dimensions of Information for School Selection

Category	Explanation
Source	Authority that generates and shares content; refers to who or whom information comes from; may pertain to a (secondary source) platform for dissemination, like a district fair, a school's open house, a website or the original source like district data, school personnel statements, parent ratings, or state standardized test scores
Access	Means by which knowledge is made available or disseminated and the required actions for obtaining it; may indicate constraints on the availability of useful school information
Content	Academic or nonacademic descriptive features of schools and students; content refers to the subject matter of school information that families,

[24] I reviewed literature on information for school selection determined that this concept is not understood in adequate depth or sufficient clarity. This table is a brief version of a typology for considering the way academic studies address aspects of information for school selection. The deductive codes in Chapter 3 and Appendix D explain these dimensions of information in greater detail and Appendix C describes the methods, study selection criteria, and search terms I used to conduct this review.

	schools, districts, and states share. A distinct form of content involves school marketing or "glossified" information (Jabbar, 2016) meant to persuade an audience of the desirability or quality of a school.
Type	Way that content is constructed, visualized, and conveyed to the audience
Supports	Heuristics or interventions aimed at encouraging choosers to consider certain types, sources, or content. Often pertains to formal measures of school quality
Personalization	Manner in which knowledge or its delivery is customized to the perceived interests, expectations, and needs of decision makers and not standardized. May also describe how information is shaped to certain school options and characteristics
Relationality	Interpersonal qualities of relationship through which information is exchanged (e.g., connectedness, trust, insider status, familiarity, or authority that may increase the value or usefulness of information)

Sources. Unequal access to school information is complicated by the range of types and sources that it stems from. School "information" is not clearly defined in education literature, perhaps because it takes many forms and derives from myriad sources. In this study, information refers to any data or knowledge about institutions or enrollment processes that families take into account while making decisions about the educational futures they want for their children.[25] It comprises "formal" (Delale-O'Connor, 2019, p. 1010) sources that districts, states, and schools disseminate, like standardized test scores, state-designated proficiency grades, and high school graduation rates, as well as the informal "impressions and experiences of friends, neighbors and relatives" (Ball & Vincent, 1998, p. 378) that pass through parents' social networks or between parents and school personnel (Bader, Lareau & Evans, 2019; Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018). These "impressions and experiences" are often formed through the "ordinary measures" of eyewitness experiences, reasoned judgements, and consultation, instead of rigid and reductive formal evaluations (Schneider & Gottlieb, 2021). Additionally, nongovernmental third-party sources of information like Greatschools.org, which use data about student achievement and demographics,

[25] "Information" also involves procedural knowledge about school admissions, as noted, and involves ascertaining the "rules of the game" with regards to school visits, timing, norms, and even questions to ask; navigating information systems; and other enrollment procedures (Chen, 2019 Lareau et al., 2016).

increasingly have currency in choice contexts (Hasan & Kumar, 2019; Schneider, 2017; Stein & Nagro, 2015). The information content that these sources provide varies widely, and it emphasizes various academic and nonacademic school characteristics (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010).

Increasingly, district authorities in cities like Washington, D.C., Chicago, Boston, and New York City have adopted unified lottery and information systems to match students to desired schools when the number of applicants exceeds available space.[26] Many of these lottery and application systems use algorithms to place students in participating schools with available seats and to waitlist them in higher-ranked schools according to a randomly generated number and school-designated preferences (Abdulkadiroğlu, Pathak, & Roth, 2009). These systems, which are characterized by common applications and online information hubs, are designed to simplify school admissions and make information gathering more manageable for families (Gross & Campbell, 2017). Though these systems have centralized district information, unified enrollment systems may not improve the quality of parents' choices – in terms of district metrics (Glazerman & Dotter, 2017) or parent satisfaction as a study of unified enrollment in Camden, NJ by Campbell et al (2016) found that parents perceived an absence of quality schools and the need to make tradeoffs in school preferences.

Access. Theoretically, parents will pursue information about schools that best fit their children if the costs of doing so appear to be worthwhile (Loeb & Valant, 2019). However, economists have long recognized information as an Achilles' heel of choice because of availability issues. Lovenheim & Turner (2018) summarize this tension in terms of market function:

[26] Roughly 35% of the 300 largest school districts in the U.S. now use centralized lottery and enrollment systems (Lagos & Saltmarsh, 2023).

> Parents must have information about each local school's productivity that allows them to make the choices that will generate competition between schools. Imperfect information effectively reduces choices, as parents do not have the requisite knowledge to assess the productivity of local options. (p. 284)

Several potential barriers complicate both collection and use of information. First, the task of assessing schools is technically complex. In order to research schools, members of the public have to compare the relative effectiveness of dynamic social systems and use proxies to evaluate the intricacies of teaching and learning (Eisner, 2000). Even experts continue to disagree on what it is that we should be looking at if we are gauging the quality of a school (i.e., proficiency vs growth on an exam, graduation rate, or enrollment in a reputable school later). Schneider & Gottleib (2018) note that "our [social] concepts are neither readily isolable from one another, nor stable across time and space" (p. 549), which suggests a tension in trying to relegate quality to any particular metrics. It can also be difficult to decipher which characteristics of schools indicate future success or wellbeing. Education is a good that we acquire to meet our immediate needs, but the real benefits of the children's school experiences are often realized much later.

In addition to these challenges, parents have different abilities to make use of these resources at their disposal. While schools and districts disseminate concise, evaluative information through websites and printed resources at events like open houses, parents are differently capable of understanding these sources based on the readability of text, the challenge of parsing objective content from marketing, and the scarcity of non-English materials (Delale-O'Connor, 2019; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015).[27] Moreover, many low-income families tend to be less likely than middle-income families to have access to contacts who offer valuable information

[27] These marketing materials are often designed to subtly distort reality.

about schools and how to gain enrollment (Weinenger, 2014; Teske, Fitzpatrick, & Kaplan, 2007; Nield, 2005). Nor are they as well prepared to visit schools or navigate new relationships and procedural requirements. Such work is particularly difficult to manage for families with rigid work schedules, health challenges, or financial constraints (Andre-Bechely, 2013; Brown, 2021; Haley-Lock & Posey-Maddox, 2016; Patillo, Delale-O'Connor & Butts, 2014; Potterton, 2020). Such information asymmetries between families are associated with unequal educational outcomes along the lines of race, SES, and primary language (Lareau, 2014; Corcoran et al., 2018).

Several studies using expansive data sets underscore problems with parents' access to useful school information. Campbell et al. (2017) interviewed 85 education and community leaders in 18 cities and conducted a survey of 3,200 parents in eight cities to report on changes in school choice programs. Results revealed that information availability was the third most significant difficulty, behind finding a school that is "a good fit" (p. 10) and a lack of schools. In that study's embedded survey, information access was a top concern for parents and most of all for parents in the lowest of three income thresholds (i.e., below $34,999, between $35,000 and $74,999, and above $75,000). Only 12 of these 18 cities had a consolidated school guide and of those, seven guides had no school culture indicators. The authors report that parents sought information on "school culture, safety, family services, and services for students with additional needs, such as English language learners and those with disabilities" as well as "how welcoming the school will be for adults" (p.12). In another study survey of 4000 parents in eight cities, DeArmond and coauthors (2014) found the most common barriers to school choice were understanding which schools that children were eligible for (33%), transportation (26%), and a general lack of information (25%). Reflecting information disparities, the authors found that

parents who did not hold a high school diploma were "much more likely" (p. 368) to identify school eligibility and a lack of information as obstacles, compared with parents who had a higher educational attainment.

Content. The kinds of descriptive characteristics that parents value reflect the kinds of schools that parents want for their children. Numerous studies demonstrate that parents prioritize academic quality in their school enrollment decisions (Burgess et al., 2015; Bell, 2009; Campbell et al., 2016; Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Kleitz et al., 2000), a finding that holds across race and ethnicity (Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016). Other preferences may differ along demographic lines (Glazerman & Dotter, 2017). Compared to lower income families, some studies indicate that affluent and middle-class parents tend to identify school ratings based on standardized test scores as a more significant factor (Harris & Larsen, 2015; Hastings et al., 2009). However, these preference differences pertaining to school ratings among lower and higher-income families appear to be dependent on geographic constraints that lower income families face disproportionately, as working-class and poorer families value school proximity to home more so than their middle- and upper-income peers (Corcoran & Jennings, 2019). Parents express an interest in academic quality both in word and deed; they not only say that quality is a prime determinant of their choices but also convey it through prioritized lists of schools on common applications (Bergman & Hill, 2018; Glazerman & Dotter, 2017). Importantly, some scholars question operative definitions of "quality" (Stein, Goldring, & Cravens, 2011), as some parents make decisions based on student achievement levels rather than measures of growth (Valant & Weixler, 2022; Houston & Henig, 2021; Abdulkadiroğlu et al., 2020), although the latter may better approximate schools' contribution to student learning. Additionally, qualitative rather than quantitative analyses show that some parents see the presence of programs like dual language

immersion – and not student achievement (Kimelberg 2014; Rhodes & DeLuca 2014) – as true indicators of academic quality (Olson-Beal & Hendry, 2012).[28]

A broader set of nonacademic factors can shape families' school selections. Parents may privilege details like closeness to home (Bierbaum et al., 2021) or the workplace (Teske, Fitzpatrick, & O'Brien, 2009); public transportation availability (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999); before- and after-school care opportunities (Harris, 2020); and school composition in terms of race and social class (Hastings & Kane, 2009; Roda & Wells, 2013). Safety concerns are a decisive factor (Patillo, 2015), particularly for those living in neighborhoods of persistent government disinvestment (Waitoller, 2020; Phillippo & Griffin, 2016), though less so for economically advantaged families (Hailey, 2020).[29] In some cases, families privilege certain factors due to a child's age, like distance to school for elementary school students (Lincove, Cowen, & Imbrogno, 2018) and extracurricular activities for high school students (Harris & Larsen, 2015).

Perhaps unanticipated by market models for schooling, the race and class of students' peers is a key and evident influence in parents' school choices (Abdulkadiroglu, Pathak, Schellenberg, & Walters, 2020; Glazerman & Dotter, 2017). Studies suggest that some White families use Whiteness as a "surrogate" (Rowe and Lubienski, 2016, p. 10) for school quality and avoid schools with a majority of Black and Hispanic students (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Saporito & Lareau, 1999). One study comparing the school preferences of students and parents by race and ethnicity showed that White parents had the greatest concern for school racial composition in how they set their school preferences (Haley, 2022). Saporito and Lareau (1999)

[28] Concerns about academic quality are further demonstrated when parents exit schools and cite dissatisfaction with teaching and curriculum (Villavicencio, 2013; Patillo, 2015)

[29] One recent study suggests that the appearance of stringent safety measures and high enrollment of Black students is a deterrent for many families across races (Billingham, C. M., Kimelberg, S. M., Faude, S., & Hunt, 2020).

hypothesized that many White families engage in a the two-stage school search process where, in the first stage, they latently discount schools with high percentages of students of color. In addition to "racially-informed choosing," (Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 1996), White parents base decisions on the presence of middle class or affluent students (Lareau, 2014; Goyette, 2008; Holme, 2002) or follow the suggestion of a higher-class peer (Fong, 2019),[30] although a few studies document a smaller proportion of "cosmopolitan" white families intentionally choosing racially diverse school settings (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014; Olson-Beal & Hendry, 2012).

While some Black parents select schools that keep them in the racial majority (Hastings, Kane & Staiger, 2005), other Black and racially minoritized parents consider schools that range in racial and ethnic make-up (Burdick-Will, 2017). Studies have repeatedly shown that choice policies increase students' racial isolation (Roda & Wells, 2013; Frankenburg & Taylor, 2018; Mann et al., 2020). Yet, current scholarship has not clarified the degree to which these phenomena stem from racial and class bias per se. That is, it is not clear to what extent more privileged parents have information about these parameters and choose schools based on latent racist, ablest, or classist impulses, or whether stratifying effects occur due to a lack of other objective information about schools themselves.[31] Though it seems unlikely, it is possible that more nuanced and widely accessible information about growth or school quality would undermine racial isolation between schools. At least one recent study indicates that foregrounding student growth leads parents to choose more diverse schools (Houston & Henig, 2021). Another study shows that when parents to consider more types of information, they are more likely to choose schools that are unfamiliar to them (Schneider et al., 2018). Taken

[30] For many white families in particular, preference for schools with uniform peer groups extends to avoidance of high numbers emergent bilingual students (Yoon & Gulson, 2010) or recent immigrants (Levine-Rasky, 2008).
[31] By posing this question, I do not mean to suggest that white and middle class or affluent parents deserve blanket immunity for the many marginal decisions contribute to between-school resegregation (Orfield & Jarvie, 2020).

together, research on the variety of preferred academic and nonacademic aspects of schools may suggest that districts inadvertently reinforce racial and class biases in school selection when they reduce school desirability to a handful of digestible indicators.

Type and Supports. Parents may use more widely available information to make better school decisions in terms of fit and school performance. As researchers have explored the provision of simplified and readable forms of information, they found that parents' stated preferences and choices are sensitive to the framing of certain types of information. Consistent with market theory, studies have demonstrated the impact of single-page information sheets with schools' test score data (Hastings and Weinstein, 2008); parent testimonials (Valant & Loeb, 2014); websites featuring graphics and limited text (Glazerman, Nichols-Barrer, Valant, Chandler & Burnett, 2020); and targeted lists of nearby schools with above-average graduation rates (Corcoran et al., 2018; Cohodes et al., 2022). To the extent that choices for higher-rated schools may be beneficial from a systemwide perspective, these interventions have demonstrated that decisions about higher quality schools are reinforced through access to useful and available information. These studies hold implications for further inquiry given the low cost and efficacy of these interventions.

In their original study, Hastings and Weinstein (2008) used a natural experiment and a field experiment to assess the impact of simplified information about schools' academic performance on parent decisions and the resulting outcomes for student learning. Using a regression discontinuity design, the study took advantage of a 2004 NCLB policy shift to compare the choices of parents who received a three-page alphabetical list of schools and exam scores in the summer with those who did not. In the field experiment portion of their study, researchers repackaged information into a single-page list of schools by the academic ranking

and examined families' choices for schools to which they were not guaranteed admission. Hastings & Weinstein (2008) found that the proportion of parents in Charlotte-Mecklenburg who selected a nonguaranteed school increased by about seven percentage points on a base of 31%, when they had information on test scores. This represented an estimated 23% increase in demand for those who had the resource. Notably, their study also analyzed students' learning gains as a result of attending schools with higher test scores, finding statistically and practically significant test scores gains of .37-.41 standard deviations for this with information supplements.

Corcoran et al. (2018) conducted a similar study, in which they provided information to underserved students in 165 high-poverty New York City schools. Researchers mailed 20,000 eighth graders customized lists of 30 nearby schools that were at or above the city mean for graduation rates, focusing on students as prime decision makers, given Sattin-Bajaj's (2015) finding that Latinx and low-income teenagers tend to drive their own enrollment decisions.[32] Authors supplied three different treatment groups a list of high schools with graduation rates at or above the city median (70%), they provided a second group with another list of schools organized by academic themes and a third group with an additional list of schools that gave priority admission to students who attended an open house along with text message reminders. The treatments in this study yielded similar results: the "Fast Facts" sheets were most influential, with students in that group 9.3% more likely to rank a higher-graduation rate school as their top choice than the control group. By encouraging more choices for schools with higher rates of school completion, the information items encouraged students to select higher performing

[32] Sattin-Bajaj (2015 & 2016), Corcoran et al. (2018), Cohodes et al. (2022), and Phillippo et al. (2019) examine middle and high school student perspectives and experiences engaging in school choice. Consistent with these studies, I recognize that many middle school students select their high schools. The current study examines parents' perspectives because many district policies position them as decision makers and because the NGO in this study advertises its services to parents as an employer benefit. In cases where I refer to parents as the sources of school decisions, it makes sense to assume it is the family member in that particular family (whether child or caregiver) who is selecting schools. "Parent," then, is a placeholder here.

schools and, in the case of those receiving “open house” reminders, encouraged greater participation in the choice process. Moreover, despite the fact that these interventions did not level the playing field as all subgroups of student responded to interventions at similar rates, the study appeared to indicate that merging customized information and assistance (in the form of timely text messages) can be more influential than providing information alone.

Cohodes et al. (2022) conducted a larger, mixed-methods field study involving 115,000 students on the verge of school transitions and 473 interviews. Their project confirmed the impact of providing students lists of nearby schools with higher-than-median graduation rates. These authors also found that online tools meant to personalize school searches using filters to screen schools and offer advice had only a modest impact. They found that English language learners had the highest response rates by a significant margin (8 percent versus 1 percent for all subgroups), which underscores the differential benefits of various approaches. The researchers hypothesize that information supports may be most influential when they constitute “tools, priming, [and] supportive materials” (Cohodes, 2022, p. 29). In another randomized control trial, Valant & Weixler (2020) used low-cost interventions, such as text messaging, flyers, and emails, to evaluate parent responsiveness. They targeted growth and distance-oriented variables. Their mixed results generally indicated that applicants were responsive to communication concerning school growth as they added more high growth schools to their list of preferred schools compared to the control group, and specifically showed larger effects for applicants search for a high school than other levels and stronger subgroup effects for families of students with disabilities. Findings from Cohodes et al. (2022) and Valant and Weixler (2020) reflect modest innovations in information support studies by further customizing information and modes of contact. These two studies have implications on equitable access to schools since certain

forms of differentiated information can have their largest impact on students who are often enrolled in lower performing schools in urban environments.

Researchers have used simulated choice environments to show the efficacy of certain types of information and presentation on parental choices (Haderlein, 2021). In one instance, Valant and Loeb (2014) conducted quick-turnaround online experiments in Washington, D.C., Milwaukee, and Philadelphia to see how parents would rate local public schools after receiving different forms of information. Their work shows a sensitivity to parent testimonials as positive or negative narrative comments were observably more influential than government ratings of schools. Studies like Valant and Loeb (2014) underscore questions about the ideal form and provision of school information. Glazerman and co-researchers (2018) helped clarify the types of web-based presentations that affect parents' school preferences. In their online experiment involving 3,500 low-income parents, authors showed that "even subtle changes can nudge parents toward choosing one type of school or another" (p. 11). Minor website adjustments and stylistic changes, like converting text or numerical data into icons shifted parent satisfaction, understanding, and choices. This study found that simply resetting the default sort order of schools from "closeness to home" to "academic performance" led parents to select schools that were rated five percentage points higher and located farther, by more than a half mile, from their homes. Together, these two studies reflect parents' sensitivity to information types and relative indecision based on the limited input at their disposal.

A few studies underscore the importance of interpretative assistance, as when middle school guidance counselors aid families with high school selections (Sattin-Bajaj, Jennings, Corcoran, Baker-Smith, & Hailey, 2018). Examining 88 school counselors as "street -level bureaucrats," Sattin-Bajaj et al. (2018) found that middle school counselors have a

fundamentally different influence on families' decisions depending upon whether counselors give "directional," "procedural," or "generic guidance." They found that the majority of school personnel take an "impersonal, bureaucratic approach" (p. 60) rather than one involving customized information or school suggestions. In particular, the authors note that students who received procedural rather than directional guidance were less likely to attend high-performing high schools. Nearly one-fourth of the counselors in the study appeared to provide additional and personalized counseling with school selection beyond providing generic information about school options, which their official duties stipulated. To the authors, these finding suggest that counselors may be effective information agents but that significant changes to counselors' job descriptions, incentives, and resources would be required for school-based interventions to work.

Collectively, these studies of information interventions suggest potential for the provision of useful information and updating systems to better equip parents with knowledge of their communities' schools. Yet, it is too early to tell if these supports can possibly help mitigate inequitable access to schools as present educational and social inequalities may simply perpetuate through choices as everyone is exposed to additional forms information.

PART III: Mediated School Choices, Personalized Information, and the Knowledge and Assistance NGOs Provide

Beyond information interventions. Information intervention studies reaffirm that families employ rationality by seeking and acting on information (Devine, 2004), and by relying on information shortcuts.[33] At the same time, future research should respond to a more comprehensive understanding of information use and school decision making. Scholars have

[33] Or, in practice, families tend to make boundedly rational decisions about schools based on available input, options, and their interest (Ben Porath, 2009).

long shown that word-of-mouth, informal, and trusted sources of information shape school decisions (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Coleman, 1990; Weinenger, 2014). These social processes are important for school decisions not only because they make choices more feasible by reducing cognitive demands (Bell, 2009), but also because social experiences offer parents signals, suggestions, and examples of valued educational goods with more situated and nuanced meanings from trusted members of their social networks (Bader, Lareau & Evans, 2019; Bell, 2009; Bossetti, 2004; Holme, 2002; Nield, 2005; Goldring & Phillips, 2008, Fong, 2019). Thus, information supports that replicate interpersonal qualities are worthy of deeper investigation.

In large urban districts, school choice forces parents to manage copious amounts of information. Particularly since the passage of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, district systems are overflowing with data geared toward school effectiveness (Burnette, 2017). For parents, filtering information through trusted social connections offers shortcuts or heuristics that may guide choosers through a thicket of data and alternatives and, in turn, make their decisions more manageable (Simon, 1997; Jones, 1995; Villavicencio, 2013). Studies of behavioral economics detail decision making constraints that limit individuals' ability to collect and process knowledge (Jabbar, 2011; Kahneman, 2003). We know that when information is overwhelming it contributes to decision fatigue, which leads to less optimal choices (Sjastad & Baumeister, 2018). Studies conducted in other contexts indicate how data overload may confound choosers' sense of goals and alternatives (Pielke, 2007). For these reasons, one study shows when parents consider less information, they experience greater satisfaction with their decisions (Lay, 2016). Bypassing some content may better enable families to manage complex choices, but studies suggest that parents seek trustworthy or authoritative sources to narrow

information (Bader et al, 2019; Chen, 2019; Fong, 2019). Consequently, we must consider who parents view as qualified to reduce the voluminous data from schools, districts, and third parties.

We know that across races and ethnicities, parents regard peer networks as trusted sources of information (Altenhofen, Berends & White, 2016; Pattillo, Delale-O'Connor, & Butts 2014; Nield, 2005). A recent experimental study comparing information types by Valant and Newark (2020) corroborates this assertion, as they report that participants preferred parents to government sources and narrative comments to statistical ratings. Using data from GreatSchools, YouGov, and MTurk, the authors' study reinforced that negative comments tend to more affective that positive ones and that word-of-mouth information resonates more deeply. Perhaps the gravity of "a life-stage transition" (Bader et al., 2019, p. 484) like school transitions invites many parents to validate their knowledge and actions with trusted peers. Researchers have also observed how making the right choice provokes anxiety for many parents, even inciting "moral panic" in some middle-class parents (Ball, 2003, P. 10; Potterton, 2020). Accordingly, choosers may rely on peers for whom they feel an "affinity" or "perceive [to have] similar approaches to education and childrearing" (Fong, 2019, p. 165) to help manage the emotional toll of these decisions. Families may look for a trusted source to help them grasp the more intangible characteristics of schools, like "the feel of a building" (Schneider et al., p. 24) or the "fit" (Ball & Vincent, 1998, p.) for their child, especially in light of personal concerns about the availability of certain programs or services offered. According to Kafka (2022), "social construction of fit" becomes more influential than the formal information that districts disseminate. Accordingly, one needs more than an understanding of rational optimization to grasp these aspects of parents' choices.

In some cases, parents narrow school options by identifying a member of their network who they view as an insider or especially qualified (Bader et al., 2019; Fong, 2019). Or they may rely on multiple corroborating sources from their networks, a form of "complex contagion" (Fong, 2019, p. 171; Centola & Macy, 2007), that offers more persuasive power. Consequently, parents are sometimes led astray when they rely on peers' insights since such knowledge can be outdated or constitute misinformation, especially in quickly changing contexts like New Orleans (Lay, 2016).

More than just heuristics, network information gives families greater confidence in their decisions (Schneider et al., 2018) and offers a basis for social comparisons that provide parents with signals of how peers behave in similar situations (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2014). Many families privilege the views of their friends, among others in their peer networks (Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Yettick et al., 2016). For some families, choosing schools means choosing peer groups for their child and themselves (Lareau, 2014; Rowe & Lubienski, 2016; Holme, 2002). Insofar as school decisions are based on social comparisons, interactions signal standards of acceptability and peer group inclusion. As a result, some parents defer to and depend on high status members within their networks to filter ideas about potential schools such that school choices are made to placate neighbors and avoid alienation from community members (Bader et al., 2019; Holme, 2002).

The studies above suggest that parents rationalize their decisions in different ways, or that they do not follow the purely rational decision pathways many economists expect. Of course, some families do collect information and calculate benefits of various options guided by a set of principles that will allow them to make their best decisions (Friedman, 1962; Chubb & Moe, 1990). However, researchers describe how parents often have constrained choices in light of

geographic and logistical constraints and their views of what is safe (Bell, 2009; Ben Porath, 2009; Villavicencio, 2013). To determine acceptability, these parents may instead follow emotional processes and imitate peers, fueled by anxiety over social reproduction and status.[34] Instead of having a rationality deficit, some parents may follow familiar school-finding habits (Lay, 2016), opt for a "known quantity" (Buckley and Schneider 2005; Goldring & Haussman, 1999) or, at times, be skeptical about the benefits of sending their child to a more-distant school (Van Dunk & Dickman, 2004; Bossetti, 2004; Fong, 2019). Because parents rationalize decisions differently, and because they often have idiosyncratic or concealed reasons for selecting schools, simplified information in the absence of support may have limited potential for influencing school decisions.

For other reasons, multiplying information may make little difference for underserved families given the many impediments to learning about and selecting schools. Researching and enrolling in schools obscures potential burdens that families must address (Ellison & Aloe, 2019; André-Bechely, 2013; Patillo, Delale-O'Connor & Butts, 2014; Potterton, 2020). Researchers recognize that school choices come with costs – some explicit and some hidden – in terms of families' responsibilities to identify and research schooling options (Ben Porath & Johanek, 2019); decode institutional rules and practices (Lareau, Evans & Yee, 2016); and conduct communication and establish relationships with stakeholders (Sattin-Bajaj & Jennings, 2020). These tasks may be particularly difficult to manage for families hindered by work schedules, financial constraints, or illness (Patillo, 2015; Ben Porath, 2021) or for the families of emergent bilingual students (Sattin-Bajaj, 2015; Delale-O'Connor, 2019). As part of this labor, parents are

[34] Scholars have expressed that parents bounded rationality, for instance, by drawing on "class-based tastes and norms" (Reay, David & Ball, 2005), "cultural logics" (Fuller & Elmore, 1996), or "a mixture of rationalities" (Bossetti, 2004, p. 388).) These choices may be "highly personal" and "emotive," (Ball & Vincent (1998, p. 388), driven by emotion (Rowe & Lubienski, 2016) or the product of "meta-rationality" (Buckley & Schneider, 2003).

expected to master particular application procedures and unwritten rules, like figuring out strategies for how to get admitted to high-demand schools (Lareau et al., 2016).

In short, information intervention studies reveal that the framing and provision of information are key; yet they have inadequately evaluated the types of information being used. Nor have they determined the comparative impact of different forms of information or whether different social groups benefit from different interventions. Information interventions may benefit families across social classes, diluting the impact that these resources have on underserved families or even perpetuating middle class families' advantages with school access. That is, parents who are comparatively advantaged and already invest heavily in their school searches may benefit from information interventions as much or more than the marginalized families that these supports tend to target (Chen & He, 2021; Corcoran et el., 2018). In these cases, more information, however condensed or targeted, would do little to solve equity problems related to school information and access.

Personalized information and mediated school selection as support. Particularly in robust choice policy contexts, collaborating with families on school decision making could streamline information, personalize assistance, and facilitate application and admissions procedures. Since gathering usable information and navigating choice processes can pose multidimensional problems for underserved families in particular (Teske et al., 2007; Jochim et al, 2019; Bossetti, 2004), an interpersonal approach which leverages insider knowledge may benefit families preparing to choose schools. This approach resembles counselors supporting students with college searches or financial aid, and a surrogate form of network support – one that affluent families have taken advantage of through professional school choice consultants (Prothero, 2015). For families, school selection assistance may generate additional knowledge about

schools in systems where it is scarce and guide those who encounter a barrage of metrics and features in districts with robust information systems. School choice researchers have observed that information may be publicly accessible, but some families require more support obtaining and negotiating the data that are available (Villavicencio, 2013).

Although current models of school choice are predicated on competition between schools with little incentive to provide parents with objective guidance, some evidence points to the effectiveness of more holistic approaches to school decisions. Counselors, teachers, administrators, district officials and nonprofit organizations are acknowledged in studies as agents of choice assistance. For example, one study found that some guidance counselors in New York City public school selectively expand their roles to assist low-income students with choice even in the absence of policy directives (Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018). Another study of high school choice in Philadelphia showed that counselors who take a "brokering" (Haxton, 2010, p. 101) role with ongoing involvement, benefit all students but especially English Language Learners. At the same time, some findings cast doubt on counselors' willingness or ability to be choice liaisons. Sattin-Bajaj and Jennings (2020) revealed many counselors' deep skepticism about a citywide enrollment system and choice as a fair student sorting mechanism. Nevertheless, school personnel may be well positioned to help parents navigate the educational marketplace, especially if lower SES families, in particular, view their children's current schools as reliable in educational matters (Andre-Becheley, 2013; Sattin-Bajaj 2015; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall. 2000; Teske, Fitzpatrick, & Kaplan, 2007). One survey-based study in Denver revealed that parents saw teachers and school administrators as the most useful "resource" for helping them gather information (Yettick et al., 2016). Overall, school personnel's role in choice assistance remains understudied (Sattin-Bajaj, 2015).

Assistance may be quite useful where certain forms of information are particularly difficult for families to procure, such as procedural knowledge that helps families with school enrollment. For applicants, these "rules of the game" (Lareau et al., 2016) entail strategic thinking about seat availability and the likelihood of admission at different schools. Monarrez & Chien (2021) observe that gamesmanship is valuable for setting school priority lists. Additionally, support from an informed insider helps evaluate the quality of schools, a deceptively difficult task for almost every stakeholder. With assistance, underserved parents may gain firsthand knowledge of options that, coupled with student test scores or graduation rates, help provide a comprehensive view of their options. Such complementary lenses that draw on formalized district measures and more personal judgement and experience could lead to more thorough and realistic evaluations of schools (Schneider & Gottleib, 2021). As noted, the theory of school choice begins to break down when families do not participate (Buckley & Schneider 2005; Fiske & Ladd 2000); when they base their decision on few sources of information (Schneider et al, 2000; Teske, 2007; Weinenger, 2014) when schools screen out students who have behavior problems, special needs, or low prior achievement (Bergman & McFarlin, 2018) or when schools market themselves without improving capacity (Loeb et al., 2011; Lubienski, 2005; Jabbar, 2015). Where various problems arise, advocates may sometimes help parents consider more schools or circumvent barriers.[35]

[35] Families were not supposed to be left to their own devices with school decisions. When Chubb & Moe (1990) argued that choice could "transform" educational institutions "all by itself" (p. 8), they envisioned "parent liaisons" (p. 10) who parents would be "required" to meet with. Together they would evaluate schools and children's needs. Parents could further expect "advice and assistance" with completing school applications, all of which was part of their vision of providing students a fair opportunity to access schools. The authors recognized a role of sharing expertise and person-to-person support that government would play in order for parental choice systems to function as intended. Perhaps, in the case of school selection, market expansion has outpaced the enactment of regulations meant to curb abuses.

More Options May Not Be better. Studies outside of K-12 school choice also show that individualized assistance with key decisions has significant impact in areas like Medicare Part D (Kling et al., 2012), health insurance plan selection (Chen, 2019), college attendance (Carrell & Sacerdote, 2013), and FAFSA completion (Bettinger, Long, & Oreopoulos, 2012). For instance, in Bettinger et al. (2012), three different groups of low-income individuals who had just received H&R Block tax preparation service were offered three interventions concerning the importance of college and availability of financial aid: (i) personal assistance with completing and filing a FAFSA, (ii) information on their financial aid eligibility based on their tax return (but no assistance with FAFSA completion), and (iii) a financial aid brochure (for the comparison group). Results of this 17,000-member quasi-experimental study revealed that for each of three experimental groups (i.e., high school seniors or recently graduated, young adults with no prior college experience, and young adults with some prior college experience), those who received FAFSA assistance were substantially more likely to submit the FAFSA and, to a lesser extent, attend college in the following year and remain for two consecutive years.

Similar examples are also instructive. Chen (2019) shows that third-party intermediaries helped acclimate consumers to the unwritten rules of social insurance program. The author emphasizes the effectiveness of a "bounded relationality" approach (Chen, 2019, p. 7), or a process whereby intermediaries build trust and provide information shortcuts to help consumers steer through market exchanges. Such collaborative approaches, where they exist in schools, might accommodate parents' various notions of educational quality and take more seriously the importance of "matching" schools and families' needs (Harris & Larsen, 2015). Such studies emphasize the value of word-of-mouth communication in complex exchanges or decisions,

where tailored support helps connect knowledge of options and facility with application processes to individuals' abilities and interests.

Lastly, assistance, or "high touch nudges" Oreopoulos (2020), may actually entail the degree of "differentiated engagement" (Campbell et al., 2017, p. 16) idealized by choice programs. Oreopoulos applies the work of Thaler and Sunstein (2009) to argue that "interventions using real people offering up-close help, such as application assistance, coaching, or tutoring show more consistent positive impacts than low-touch nudges" (p. 13). While personal assistance is more costly in terms of time and finances, different forms of support may be essential because in that social groups engage in choice in "qualitatively different" ways (Waitoller & Super, 2017, p. 34).[36] Several studies emphasize how families make "positioned choices" (Ellison & Aloe, 2019) that depend on geographic and cultural factors. For example, the decisions of African American mothers proceed from their experiences, perceptions, and educational priorities rather than dominant, White expectations and norms (Brown, 2021; Cooper, 2007; Ellison & Aloe, 2019).

NGOs and schools as liaisons. School and district personnel as well as NGO members offer possible points of school selection assistance. On one hand, relationships between school personnel and parents could be fruitful since parents tend to have access to social capital from school-based individuals (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Parents could use these already existing relationships to access and mobilize information. Presumably, school-based ties also could lead to positive spillovers as some parents experience greater connection with teachers or administrators. On the other hand, there are reasons to doubt that school personnel will reach out

[36] Waitoller & Super (2017) assert, "Black and Latinx families of students with dis/abilities engaged with school choice in ways that are qualitatively different from those of their White counterparts as well as those of Black and Latinx families of students without dis/abilities" (p. 34)

to parents who they perceive as disengaged or uninvolved for not being present at school-sponsored events (Haley-Lock & Posey-Maddox, 2016). Accordingly, comparatively advantaged populations might be more inclined to capitalize on school-based voluntary services. Likewise, even when counselors collaborate with parents to prepare for school decisions, most limit themselves to their enumerated roles and professional duties (Sattin-Bajaj et al, 2020).

Studies demonstrate how some public schools have disserved Black and Latinx families through underinvestment, denial of services, and disproportionate school closures (Bierbaum, 2020; De La Torre et al., 2015; Dixson et al., 2015; Waitoller, 2020). Instances of schools or districts making educational decisions that exclude or overlook minoritized families, neighborhoods, or groups cast doubt on the suitability of school-centered collaboration for more equitable models of school choice. Underserved parents may be less likely to obtain information or assistance from school-based contacts if they view schools as unwelcoming or untrustworthy. Meanwhile, familiar faces may be more comforting to seek out for school selection assistance than unknown personnel. In a study of mothers' and caregivers' network connections in a Philadelphia magnet school, Quinn et al (2020) documented a positive association between school-based involvement and access to resources. Their study indicated that the amount participation in school-based networks rather than social position in terms of class or race determined parents' tendency to share, access, or mobilize resources. But, as noted, poor and working-class parents who have less time and access to childcare confront additional barriers to participation in school-backed events or processes (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Strained relationships between families and schools may diminish parents' participation at schools, in general. According to some studies, parents of color who experience racial discrimination and microaggressions may be reluctant to consult school personnel (Cooper,

2007; Pattillo, 2014). Additionally, where adequate language services are not provided, many families who are non-native English speakers may be unable to formally participate in schools (Soutullo et al., 2016). In a prior exploratory study, I found that parents' social capital in their ties to school personnel in DC schools was largely unused for school decisions, in part, due to strained prior relationships with school officials and low expectations of assistance from schools (Saltmarsh, 2022). Even where school-based social linkages exist, the possibly poor condition of person-to-person relationships may hamper initiatives that aim to embed resources within school networks.

Beyond school campuses, nonprofit-backed parent advocates have used "hands-on, personalized assistance" (Jochim, Heyward, Gross, 2019, p. 2) to aid parents in navigating selection processes. While collaborating on school choices is an ordinary approach for most families, in light of the relational nature of school selection (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1995; Holme, 2002; Nield, 2005; Goldring & Phillips, 2008), Navigator services represent a new model of interpretive assistance. Thus, the specific work of these nonprofit organizations is worth consideration, especially since their approach to decision assistance has eluded empirical investigation. Studies like this one help investigate parents' experiences with these Navigator services and explore questions about whose interests are served by this type of support.

The Center on Reinventing Public Education describes nonprofit organizations which provide "Navigator services" (Heyward et al., 2020) to low-income families in at least 14 U.S. cities. These Navigator services support and "guide" (Jochim et al., 2019, p. 2) families on a one-to-one basis through the school choice process that may be complicated or confusing for families, like districtwide application systems and school admission fairs (Campbell et al., 2016). They also provide tailored assistance that equips families with content about school safety,

services, culture, and receptiveness to families that they are unable to acquire through standardized sources like guides and websites (Heyward et al., 2020). For example, one such Navigator service, DC School Reform Now, employs "parent advocates" from the local area who identify families through schools and community resource centers in low-income neighborhoods. In 2017-2018, advocates with DC School Reform Now shared information and support with the families of 1,109 students and, in response to family requests, sent deadline reminders, researched schools, communicated school match results, filled out applications, conducted virtual school tours and completed school enrollment forms with parents (Jochim et al., 2019). Navigators are presumably able to respond to families' different needs, school preferences, and circumstances with appropriate variations in assistance.

Descriptive studies suggest that these agents benefit from possessing certain skills, knowledge, and similarities with the parents they serve. Parent advocates must be able to establish trust with families to exchange information about children and reinforce the value of their own input (Heyward et al., 2020; Valant, 2022). Studies of community and parent engagement outside of school choice also suggest that establishing rapport, credibility, and trust with families improves collaboration with school personnel (Marsh & Hall, 2017). In the context of choice Navigators, organization members build trust through sustained contact with parents (Heyward et al., 2020) and an explicit focus on relationship building (Valant, 2022). Parent advocates or Navigators also tend to live and work in the same community as parents and share racial, ethnic, and cultural similarities (Jochim et al., 2019). Ordinarily for school selection, many parents turn to those in the community who they view as insiders (Teske et al., 2007). Numerous studies suggest that parents find friends and other parents, those they may share commonalities with, to be the most useful sources of information about schools (Mavrogordato

& Stein, 2016; Yettick et al., 2016). In line with studies of other topics, the finding that individuals who act as cultural brokers might be able to substitute the culturally specific understandings of favored school informants (Moll et al., 1992) also applies here. Given the various ways families engage with school choice, the value of collaboration may be tied to the success of the relationship or relevance of the information.

While the openness and reach of public schools can make them suitable platforms for interpretive assistance with choice, nongovernmental organizations have other advantages. NGOs function as a "third way" or "third sector," distinct from government and the market (Klees, 2020; Stiglitz, 2006). The independence of NGOs allows them to play a valuable role that can challenge or complement majority processes, values, and interests (Clark, 1991). As voluntary and mission-driven actors, NGOs are less beholden to various organizational strictures, such as the specified roles of school personnel. NGOs can take various forms depending on their sources of funding, size, and professionalization. Furthermore, their relative autonomy from the state may provide some advantages, such as an ability to attract families who have been alienated or disrespected by district or school representatives.[37] In the case of school choice navigation, NGO members who provide assistance may provide families their opinions about schools, rather than being bound by "objective" advice the way school or district personnel are (Valant, 2022).

Valant (2022) illustrates a tangential role that NGO Navigator services have played by assisting the families of students that districts dislocate through school closures. When New Orleans Public Schools closed three low-performing charter schools at the end of the 2017-18 school year, they contracted with a local NGO to help these families identify schools the year

[37] While nongovernmental organizations are modern (post World War II) institutional actors, they share a lineage with Early Republic voluntary associations which Alexis de Tocqueville noted were egalitarian, interest driven, and antithetical to centralized bureaucracy.

after closure. In this case, the district further offered these students top priority for placement in oversubscribed schools through the city's centralized enrollment system, then known as OneApp. Valant (2022) compares groups of students who received both Navigator support and lottery priority to two comparison groups: (a) students who withdrew after 2016-17 and were not in a terminal grade and (b) students in other D and F-rated schools in the city who transferred in the same year, 2017-18. His analysis reveals that families who received these supports requested schools that were more highly rated in their application than comparison groups. Naturally, students who had priority placement and assistance were also more likely to be assigned to high-performing schools and more likely to be awarded seats in schools that the NGO recommended. Those in the treatment group were also more likely to remain in their next school than students in comparison groups. This study is instructive as it shows statistically significant advantages for families who gained choice advising and priority status. However, it leaves questions about why families refuse assistance, whether benefits from assistance and priority status can be disentangled, and how the NGO approaches its counseling work.

Further questions about NGO information and assistance. NGO personalized assistance could be a feasible strategy to help inform and support parent choice, but this organization and style of school choice support will require further examination. Apart from the Valant (2022) study there is limited evidence on the effect these interventions have on student placement or achievement or the conditions under which counseling may influence parents' thinking. Of the set of constraints families face in navigating school decisions, it is not clear what help parents seek from these partnerships or which constraints these organizations may help parents overcome. Also, considering the cost of "high touch nudges," questions remain about the scalability of a one-to-one approach even if this information support is desirable to parents and

demonstrably effective. In terms of financial sustainability, most of these NGOs depend on continuous fundraising (Heyward et al., 2020), which can be unreliable. In one case, district sponsorship has helped financially support a New Orleans Navigator service (Valant, 2022). As an alternative, a legislative bill in Florida is under consideration that would allocate a small percentage of state education funds for administrative services, which could presumably be used for Navigator NGOs (Pillow, 2023). These uncertain financial means complicate organizational stability.

Numerous other questions concern the a) information that Navigators share with parents, b) nature of their relationships with parents and c) strategic aims of these organizations. In terms of the information shared, given that Navigators are purported experts (Jochim et al., 2019), what is the basis for their expertise (i.e., are they former educators and what kinds and levels of experience)? How do staff members balance their personal experiences or insights with district data and organizational stores of knowledge? How differentiated (to parents' preferences and specific characteristics or constraints) is the information? Considering the nature of relationships, what methods of person-to-person help are employed and how do Navigators build bonds with parents? Given the importance of interpersonal relationships, how do Navigators build trust with families and what are the qualities or a trustworthy insider or broker? Considering the equity focus of these NGOs, how well do relationships between Navigators and parents reflect Ishimaru's (2020) dimensions of equitable partnerships?[38] With regard to the strategic aims of the orgnization, reports that these NGOs engage in parent advocacy training and district activism (Heyward et al., 2020) raise questions about their broader goals and purposes within the district.

[38] Ishimaru (2020) characterizes four key dimensions of equitable partnerships: (a) goals of systemic change, (b) proactive leadership roles for nondominant parents that seek a degree of parity between educators and families, (c) strategies that emphasize relationships and capacity building, and (d) educational change as a political process connected to social issues in the broader community context (p. 857).

Collectively, these are key questions of who plays the role of the heuristic and what their interests are, especially because school choices may be easily influenced. One can imagine cases where Navigators' interests (e.g., in promoting certain schools or "best" [Bavis, 2017] choices) perhaps diverge from parents' interests. After all, though "nudges" may be well intentioned, this guidance may have a deterministic or autocratic influence that can diminish parent agency.

Ultimately, NGO information and assistance with school selection may enhance equitable access to schools for underserved students, or it may distract from attempts to change market-style education. Sattin-Bajaj (2015) writes that "a well-integrated network of supports can help students appreciate and internalize the significance of high school choice and ultimately understand how to make academically beneficial choices" (p. 436). At the same time, we should question the ceiling for these information supports. In his 2018 article, "Transparency's Ideological Drift," Pozen explains how transparency and open data initiatives have evolved from progressive attempts to publicize instances of malfeasance or corporate capture into conservative and libertarian strategies to improve transparency around individual decisions (e.g., nutritional information). For the author, initiatives that target open information sources have sometimes supplanted efforts to regulate markets that would have been more stringent. In the case of school information systems, interpretive assistance and NGO information may be little more than a trojan horse – one that poses a mid-level solution to deeply embedded problems on the demand-side of "choice." Truly, marginalized families may benefit from NGO attempts to mediate school choices because they face steeper challenges related to school access than middle class and White families; but NGO information and support could be sporadic and selective, and more powerful as a symbol than substance.

Concluding Comments

NGO-backed information and assistance may offer an important bridge between two kinds of social capital: the informal forms of trust and legitimacy that families rely on, on one hand, and on the other, the skills, knowledge, and networks necessary to get the best access to higher-quality schools. Related studies on information supports demonstrate that school choices are "malleable" (Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018) or impressionable and that those choosing schools are receptive to concise knowledge resources that they view as meaningful and digestible (Cohodes et al., 2022; Hastings & Weinstein, 2008; Valant & Weixler, 2020). With one exception, current research on personalized assistance and Navigator information for school selection is shallow and descriptive with little attention to actual mechanisms for decision support. Additional studies are needed to better understand how NGO Navigators target underserved parents and assist them with school decisions as a means to mitigate information asymmetries.

This exploratory case study is intended to generate new theoretical propositions about the role of NGO-based decision assistance in PK-12 families' school decisions. Theoretically, school choice offers greater liberty and equity as historically underserved families gain greater autonomy to select an education institution (Friedman, 1962; Figlio & Hart, 2011). However, if these benefits are largely contingent on parents meeting challenging demands, having expertise about local schools, and navigating other structural constraints, then additional supports or policy initiatives are needed to decouple the quality of children's schools from parents' ability to choose. Personalized information and choice assistance from NGOs offer an innovative approach to meeting demand-side inequities related to information access and use. Person-to-person supports may help parents become savvier information consumers and better equipped to navigate enrollment processes, which may lead to better school decisions in terms of quality and

fit. In the next chapter, I examine the data and methods used to derive lessons about this NGO's approach to information and assistance with school selection.

Chapter 3: Research Design, Data and Methods

Overview

To gain insight into information and assistance that NGO Navigators provide, this study collects new qualitative data from interviews with NGO personnel and parents in New Orleans, LA. Data collection focuses on the way one non-profit organization collaborates with parents to select schools for their children. By using case study methods and in-depth interviews primarily with Navigators and NGO administrators, this research explores ways in which professionals support elementary- and middle-school parents in choosing their child's next school, much as high school counselors currently do with college and financial aid applications or career planning. Through interviews and document analysis, the study illuminates nuanced aspects of Navigator support like how the NGO customizes content and contact with parents. However, it does not examine parent approval with the counselor and the school of choice, nor can it necessarily clarify the degree of trust between parents and advisors, what parents learn through participation, or whether parents view the information as useful.

This project is guided by the following research questions:

1. What does Ed Navigator think parents need in terms of information and assistance with selecting their school of choice, and how do they support parents in obtaining what they think parents need?
2. Where might there be opportunities to systematize or scale-up these interventions?

Several attributes of qualitative research suggest that it is well suited to this analysis of

NGO-provided school information and parental support. First, qualitative studies have the capacity to understand phenomena from participants' viewpoints (Creswell, 2009). In such cases, the aim of the study is to examine how participants make meaning of the focal point or variables being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). By centering participants' lived experiences, qualitative studies may illuminate the cultural meanings and nuanced understandings that participants bring in their relationships to phenomena being studied (Leech & Omwuegbuzie, 2007). Considering the research questions in and subject of this analysis, qualitative methods are a fitting approach because they are particularly sensitive to the idiosyncrasies of social connections as well as the way individuals make sense of these interactions.

Another virtue of qualitative methodologies that make them well aligned to the goals of this study is the way they may attend to matters of context or setting rather than neglect these influences. Maxwell (2012) asserts that qualitative research can be especially useful for interpreting the way context interacts with or shapes the focus of a study. This study offers a detailed rendering of the way NGO Navigators inform and assist families within a particular enrollment process; in this case, insights about assistance are most revealing when they account for the geographic, social, and policy-oriented challenges of selecting schools in New Orleans, a district which provides no default school placements. In this "natural setting where participants experience the issue or the problem under study" (Creswell, 2009, p. 175), methodologists recognize the explanatory potential of qualitative inquiries. In this study, I seek to identify matters of context, such as geographic proximity to schools, the trustworthiness of Navigators, and the way school quality data is filtered through parents' perceptions of public schools to provide "thick, rich description" (Leech & Omwuegbuzie, 2007, 560) that demonstrates how personalization of information and trusting relationships operate in this school choice context.

Case Study Methods

This analysis uses case study methods to illustrate the nuances of Navigator-parent relationships and school decisions. When done well, case studies offer in-depth understanding of complex situations "in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes" (Yin, 2013, p. 20). Like other qualitative methods, case studies may shed light on social processes (Merriam, 1998) and capture the relevance of individuals' real-world contexts for their actions (Stake, 1995). One particular strength of case study for this investigation is that it privileges the aggregation of various kinds of sources and allows convergent lines of inquiry. Diverse data sources provide the case study researcher with the opportunity to corroborate different informants and types of sources (Merriam, 1998). Cresswell (2013) contends that this mode of inquiry is also helpful for examining under-conceptualized or multi-dimensional topics, both of which apply to Navigator services.

Several fundamental criteria can clarify the coherence and structure of case studies in regard to phenomena, type of case, unit of analysis, bounding or exclusionary terms, and efficacy (Malen, 2020).[39] In this study, the phenomenon involves personalized assistance with parents' school decisions and enrollment. This single-case examination is a holistic case of EdNavigator's information and school selection support for parents. The unit of analysis is EdNavigator and the characteristics and qualities of school information and decision assistance that NGO counselors provided their parent-clients between 2016 and 2022 in New Orleans, LA. This unit of analysis explores school information in terms of source, content, types, delivery, tailoring and usefulness;

[39] To evaluate how well a case study is carried out, we should at least consider several key aspects of the preparation and execution of the study like the logic of the design, conceptual clarity, justification, quality of inferences, organization logic, and contribution to extant knowledge (Malen, 2020).

assistance interpreting data, identifying attractive schools, engaging with school and district personnel, and completing OneApp enrollment processes; and characteristics of the relationship between Navigators and parents.[40]

While this study examines the specific work of EdNavigator, it samples a typical case to provide insight into NGO Navigators more generally. Qualitative methodologists recognize that single case studies may create familiarity and understanding of broader constructs (Cresswell et al., 2007; Patton, 2002). In this way, insights into EdNavigator are suggestive of broader dynamics and add to an emerging body of literature on school choice and information. There is some risk of distortion in treating EdNavigator as a typical version of NGO information and assistance given variations in Navigators' approaches. However, in light of the relative absence of empirical evidence on NGOs and school choice information, a descriptive study of one NGO could help scholars understand the role that this type of organization plays in families' school decisions.

Another way to understand what this exploratory case study is about is to clarify what it does not entail. Because EdNavigator supports families with educational services from early childhood to college, this study could examine college choice, homework help, or involvement in school-based processes like IEP meetings, but it does not. Likewise, the organization shares feedback with NOLA school district and CMO leaders and publishes commentary on its blogs about parents' needs and preferences, but this study is less concerned with its systemic influence than with the impact of information assistance on school decisions. Stake (1995) conceptualizes case studies as bounded systems. This case is concerned with school information itself and the interactions of Navigators and parents that take place to help shape school selection.

[40] Please see the interview protocol (Appendix A) for more clarity on how I conceptualize and investigate the characteristics and qualities of school information and decision assistance.

Consequently, it does not estimate the quality of parents' school choices or compare decisions among those who will and will not receive assistance, nor does it target other influences on school selection outside of these relationships.

Context

To better understand this model of information assistance, I collect data from NGO personnel in New Orleans, LA. Several characteristics of this district context make it compelling but also particular. First, New Orleans's choice policies heighten issues of educational access and equity, as all students are required to choose schools by listing up to 12 preferences and being assigned a school by an algorithm-based unified enrollment system. Second, the district's market-based education reforms are well advanced. New Orleans had a small number of charter schools in the 1990s but embraced "choice" reforms wholesale in the wake of a humanitarian and ecological disaster brought on my Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and massive flooding in 2005 (Bulkley, Henig & Levin, 2010). During this period of school closures, the Louisiana legislature passed Act 35, reclassifying the majority of the city's public schools as "failing," and directed a State-appointed board to assume control. Despite an upward trend in student achievement prior to 2005, many state and city leaders as well as national reformers seized this crisis as an opportunity to convert the city's schools to charters (Jabbar, 2015) and limit district authority to nebulous coordination and oversight roles (Levin et al., 2010). The leader of the state-appointed Recovery School District (RSD), Paul Vallas, called these changes "the greatest opportunity for educational entrepreneurs, charter schools, competition and parental choice in America" (Garda,

2011, p. 73).[41] This phase of state control, which lasted from 2005 to 2019, facilitated the emergence of the first all-charter district in the U.S.

While these reforms have been unique in scale and their reliance on privatization, they follow a pattern of White-dominated state and city authorities usurping Black-controlled educational organizations (Dixson et al., 2015; Morel, 2018). Henry (2019; 2021) describes how both the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the local RSD disproportionately granted charters to White applicants instead of people of color. Similarly, Jabbar (2015) asserts that Black municipal and education leaders interpreted charter conversions and the removal of district authority as mistrust of Black leadership. In October 2005, the city discharged almost 7,000 Black educators and school staff, and when new school operators took charge, they rehired only a small fraction of them (Lincove et al., 2018). Large charter management organizations (e.g., KIPP, Renew, and Firstline Schools) tended to recruit younger white educators from outside of New Orleans, many of whom used alternative certification routes like Teach for America, New Schools for New Orleans, and TeachNOLA (Dixson et al., 2015).

Stern (2018) argues that a despite a favorable reputation for race relations, particularly among Whites and Afro-Creoles, authorities in New Orleans have historically used schools to racially segregate students and disinvest in institutions occupied or operated by Black citizens. Racial segregation appeared to expand in the period after Act 35, evident in the number of charter authorizations for nonwhite operators, the declining number of school leaders of color, and the number of students of color admitted to the city's top charter schools, (Buras, 2011;

[41] Noting the many community and student protests to prevent school closures that failed to change RSD plans, Adrienne Dixson (2015) raises the question "whose renaissance" (p. 292) to emphasize that reformers and authorities routinely displaced school families and ignored neighborhood leaders.

Henry, 2021). In this context, race and the likelihood of building trustworthy relationships between those of the same race and ethnicity, as well as those from the same locality, plays a particularly important role in creating partnerships.

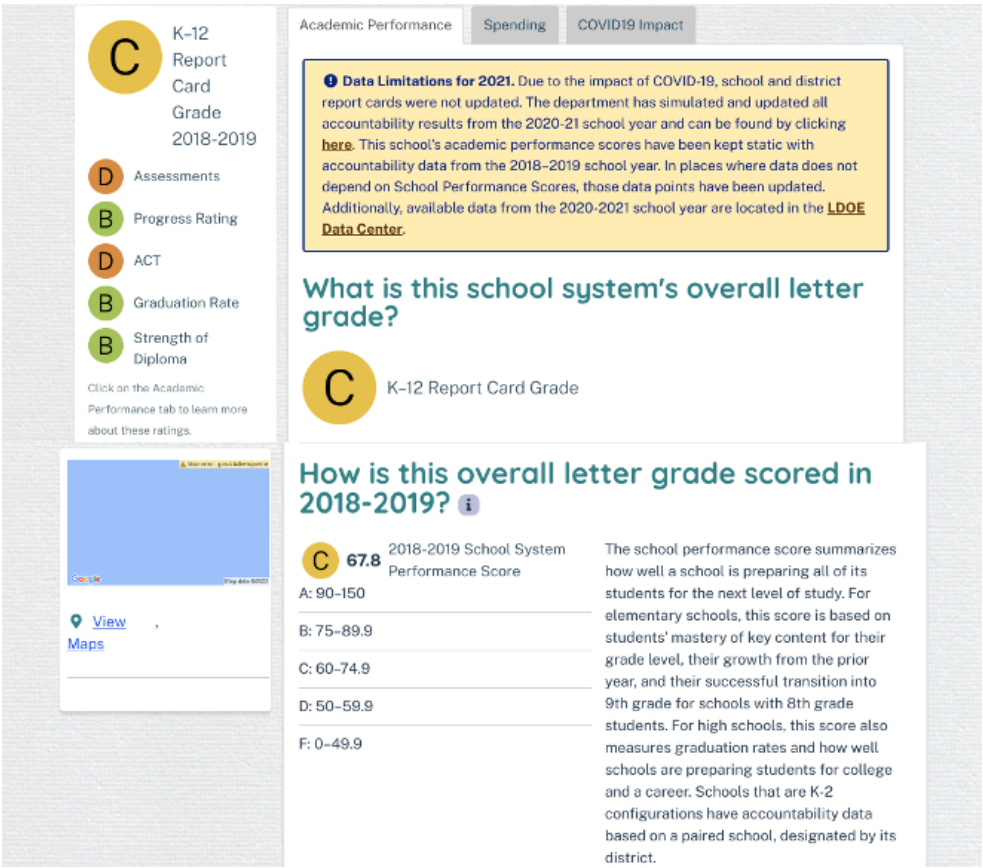
Notable in terms of district educational reforms and school selection, NOPS adopted an open enrollment system in 2011 in which all students ceased to have a geographically zoned school and instead listed school preferences on a common application. Prior to the centralized application system, Carr (2013) observes that "issues like how to enroll your children; who to contact; or who was in charge were complete mysteries to many parents" (p. 18). The patchwork of state and locally run charter and traditional public schools also contributed to unusually high rates of student mobility between schools (Valant & Weixler, 2020).

Systemwide, New Orleans public schools educate a fairly homogenous student population: 84% of students are labeled as economically disadvantaged, and 87% are African American (LA Believes). New Orleans has the highest percentage of students enrolled in private and parochial schools in the US, with 28% of school-aged children attending a private school in 2011 (Lay, 2016). While there is no perfect exemplar of market-based reforms, New Orleans has long been spotlighted as a type of "laboratory" for the expansion of school choice programs (Smith, 2012). Charter leaders have drawn large amounts of private funding from Walton, Broad, and other philanthropic foundations (Jabbar, 2015), further distinguishing New Orleans from other choice contexts. Though catastrophic conditions make New Orleans an exceptional case, reformers who support choice and charters may continue to interpret and spotlight lessons about choice-based reforms from this district.

The NOPS information system has broadened the types of knowledge available to the public in recent years. The district publishes a range of school data, including teacher and student

attendance rates; school expenditures per pupil; quality measures like School Performance Score (SPS), state LEAP scores, and graduation rates; student disciplinary data; and demographic data for students and teachers (e.g., school composition by race and ethnicity, percentage of students who are economically disadvantaged and those in foster case). Data is presented in graphs, lists, and letter-grade ratings. Several filters allow parents to search schools by noting preferences (e.g., searches can be ordered to list schools by distance from any location, open house dates, or whether schools host IB program). The website reveals the presence of some specialized personnel at schools (e.g., nurse, 504 Coordinator, instructional coach) and notes featured programs (e.g., small-group ESL services, gifted and talented programming and types of intervention programs for students who are at risk for reading disabilities). Some enrollment criteria are transparent, like specific lottery preferences (e.g., geographic priority zone, applicants with an IEP), but relative numbers of open seats are not. For parents seeking assistance, the website lists the location and address of the city's three Family Resource Centers, as well as the non-English languages services offered.[42] Below is an example the visual presentation and types of information the district offers on its website: https://nola.explore.avela.org/.

[42] Appendix B has a more thorough depiction of the district information system.



Data Collection

This study draws on various sources of evidence, including in-depth interviews, blogs, social media posts, EdNavigator's website, document analysis, online journalism, and informal conversations. Interviews with Navigators comprise the primary data set. Interviews can offer a nuanced and responsive instrument for understanding social processes from the individual's perspective (Maxwell, 2012). Supplementary data sources provide background information as well as opportunities to corroborate, problematize, or raise questions about findings. These ancillary sources include online news articles, blogs sponsored by the organization or supporters (e.g., Fordham Institute and Walton Foundation), documents that EdNavigator publicly disseminates, and social media posts on the organization's Facebook and Twitter profiles. Some

of these materials, like blogs, are particularly helpful for addressing these research questions as they feature stories of parents and students who work with the NGO.

In-depth interviews with current and former Navigators, district administrators, and parents occurred between October 2021 and March 2023. As Table 4 shows, these 13 interviews involved nine Navigators, two administrators who had previously worked as Navigators, and one parent. Over the course of the study, several personnel transitioned out of the organization. In other cases, noted in Table 4, I interviewed Navigators who recently left the NGO.[43] EdNavigator personnel were eligible if they worked with parents in a formal counseling role, either at the time or in the past. Parents were eligible if they had used EdNavigator services to select a school for their child. While I initially sought to interview parents and conduct conversations at times when they were selecting schools, I relaxed these criteria after encountering difficulties with recruiting parents. This set of interviews represents a convenience sample in light of the incorporation of former Navigators. At the same time, the sample is purposive as it includes personnel and parents who can articulate aspects of EdNavigator's decision assistance.

[43] The leaders of the NGO initially spoke with me and asked the Executive Director of the New Orleans offices to do so and allow me to observe where possible in November 2021. This manager of the New Orleans office became my contact as we had two lengthy conversations and several email exchanges. He transitioned out in August 2022 and later, after an interview with the CEO, this individual said that he would no longer be able to assist me with the research; later, he requested that I not contact employees as he sought to "protect their capacity and time." Consequently, I focused on interviewing only former members of the NGO.

Table 2

Study Participants

Name[44]	Role & Experience	Race/ Ethnicity	Prior Professional Experience
Andre Brooks	Navigator and Administrator	Black	Former high school English and foreign language teacher, graduate of NOLA PS school
Amna Williams	Navigator and Administrator	Black	Former school counselor and parent in the community
Jacob Perkins	Navigator and Administrator	White	Administrator in educational nonprofits
Matt Falconer	Navigator and Administrator	White	Former teacher and educational nonprofit administrator
Ja'Niya Broussard	Navigator	Black	Director of Student Services, CMO in New Orleans, former English teacher
Noreen Richard	Navigator and Administrator	Black	Former elementary and middle school teacher and principal
Gabriella Daniels	Navigator	Black	Former English teacher and school counselor
Ava Bryant	Navigator	Black	Family liaison for an educational nonprofit, program director at nonprofits
Victoria Bell	Parent		
Isabella Diaz	Navigator	Latinx	Master English teacher
Joseph Morales	Navigator	Latinx	Director of Student Life and Engagement in higher ed setting
Gia Foster	Navigator	Black	Special Education teacher and department coordinator

In most cases, I conducted interviews remotely via Zoom and, with participants' permission, recorded them. At the recommendation of participants, two interviews were held by phone and one took place in person at a café. Recorded meetings were uploaded to a secure university Panopto account, where they were automatically transcribed.[45] To ensure accuracy, I reviewed all transcripts while relistening to the interviews to correct them as needed. I then

[44] Pseudonyms

[45] Phone calls were recorded with participants' permission using Apple Call Recorder, which automatically transcribed conversations.

uploaded corrected transcripts to NVivo for analysis, and classified transcripts by participant characteristics (e.g., race, SES, student grade level). In order to evaluate eligibility and share the online consent form, I corresponded with participants by email prior to the conversation and began each interview by answering questions about the study after confirming required participant criteria, a process which allowed me to identify three people who did not meet the study criteria.

Recruitment occurred in two phases. Initially, I contacted the organization and contacts shared my request to talk with others; this approach allowed me to set up the first five interviews. I then used an opportunistic snowball sampling strategy to recruit additional participants (Miles et al., 2014) by asking NGO personnel and parents for suggestions about others who fit the study criteria and by sharing study flyers publicly. In three other cases, a participant suggested another person who may be willing to conduct an interview. There were four other instances where friends and former colleagues in New Orleans suggested potential participants, but I was only able to accept two of these offers to make a connection because I volunteered not to contact current employees after March 2023. To recruit participants who are not presently working with EdNavigator, I posted study flyers in public libraries, businesses that EdNavigator partnered with (e.g., International House Hotel) where I was granted permission, and on Facebook and Twitter. In several cases, I sent an email message to a former employee, whose identity I learned about after searching LinkedIn.com, where addresses were publicly available. After taking part in the study, I sent participants $30 Amazon e-gift cards to acknowledge their time and patience.

Following initial screening conversations to ensure eligibility, NGO personnel and parents engaged in one semi-structured, open-ended interview.[46] Due to the number of questions

[46] One administrator and Navigator offered and gave two interviews.

and some participants' willingness to share extra time, interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and took 54 minutes on average. Discussions were semi-structured, as they incorporated the flexibility of probing questions, but were systematic by including specific follow-up questions that I asked of each participant. Open-ended questions were meant to prompt parents to share how they communicated about and used school information, partnered with a parent or Navigator, and viewed effective information support related to school searches and enrollment procedures that constituted assistance. In the course of listening to interviewee responses, researchers have a valuable opportunity to invite participants to say more about their experiences, beliefs, and perceptions regarding key topics in the study (Maxwell, 2012).

I developed the interview protocol through piloting and peer feedback that operationalize concepts in my research questions. I refined the interview questions (enclosed as Appendix A) after testing them with nonparticipants and the first three participants; then, using feedback from a more experienced researcher, I modified the question order, added additional probing questions, and identified other items to listen for. In these interviews, I asked participants about parents' process for obtaining information about options, knowledge about schools and the kinds of interpretive or procedural assistance parents desired. I asked for details of particular exchanges between Navigators and parents and encouraged participants to help me understand how NGO support differed from school and district sources. I listened for the kinds, sources, content, and other attributes of information that participants discussed. Another key area of inquiry concerned perceptions of parents' (and Navigators') strengths or assets and barriers or challenges in making school decisions as partners. In interviews with Navigators, I asked questions about how they conceived of their partner roles and what kinds of information and

assistance parents requested. With these lines of questioning, I sought to explore the links between the knowledge, assistance, and reasons for parents' decisions.[47]

To supplement evidence from this primary set of sources, I collected online artifacts and reviewed relevant websites that contained online communication. I summarized and annotated seven years of social media posts, blog entries, and outside journalistic reporting and reviewed EdNavigator's website and available promotional materials to understand the goals and characteristics of the organization, range of services, and lessons learned. Surely, many of these blog posts, parent survey responses, and other items were curated by the organization and likely reflected an ideal or aspirational narrative that organization leaders believed would attract future fundraising, business partnerships, and clients. Despite some degree of distortion, these materials covered a broad range of topics and parent interactions over the seven years of EN's operation, which helped me understand what that organization was seeking to accomplish at different times and how Navigators viewed themselves and their contributions. I found these articles on the following websites: waltonfamilyfoundation.org, gatesfoundation.org, shahfoundation.org, the74million.org, edweek.org, fordhaminstitute.org, k12dive.com, hechingerreport.org, chalkbeat.org, wno.org, nola.com, detroitfreepress.com, edpost.com, neworleansmom.com, eduwonk.com. EdNavigator also disseminated its own documents like "The Busy Family's Guide to School," which I reviewed. Blogs including medium.com, edNavigator.org/blog and federal tax documents published by propublica.org provided additional insight.

[47] Originally, I planned to ask all parents who participated in an interview to complete a brief online follow-up questionnaire about their satisfaction with a) the quality and fit of their child's new school and b) their evaluation of the assistance that they have received. Gathering insight from participants at this subsequent point would have provided additional data to help me corroborate or complicate their earlier findings as well as allow me to better understand their school transitions by examining the outcome of their decisions. Like participant observations, that the CEO initially offered, I had to adjust data collection to reflect what was realistic in the timespan of the study.

Some meaningful informal conversations with individuals familiar with EdNavigator and school choice assistance in New Orleans helped me understand the organization's work. With case study, Yin (2013) writes, "It is important to work a bit at the peripheries - to talk to people who are not central to the phenomenon but are neighbors to it" (p. 36). Accordingly, I had conversations with leaders of similar community organizations, Kids First Chicago and Oakland REACH, which helped me understand differences from EN and hone a set of inquiries that I eventually asked Navigators. I spoke with an experienced researcher who conducted a study on EN's connection to school closure and family support and a New Orleans NGO leader who had worked closely with the organization. I also had informal conversations with two NOPS Family Resource Center assistants who are essentially district-supported informants and Navigators, and who were familiar with EdNavigator. These discussions provided me some context for thinking about Navigator approaches to information and assistance and sensitized me to questions worth asking in interviews.

Data Analysis

I followed a structured and iterative process for deriving meaning and drawing conclusions. To interpret and synthesize data, I used constant comparison methods, analytic memos, matrices, and logic diagrams (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Beginning with interviews and document exploration, I sought to derive meaning from the data concurrently with additional data collection and update hypotheses as appropriate (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Maxwell, 2012). I wrote reflexive memos after each participant interview to record the tone, content, relevant findings, and surprises I heard in these conversations. I coded data in three stages, beginning with in vivo and descriptive codes, which allowed me to listen to participants and compile an

initial set of codes for a codebook (Saldana, 2016), and ending with "coding the codes" in order to condense findings into several coherent themes related to my research questions.

To systematically analyze the data, I engaged in three phases of coding. These processes allowed me to identify and compare data that are relevant to my research questions and framework (Miles et al., 2014). Saldana (2016) defines a code as, "a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, theory building, and other analytic processes" (p. 4). I compiled a set of codes from two sources: 1) emerging data drawn from participant interviews and 2) a small set of predetermined codes that I derived after conducting a review of scholarly studies related to information for school selection. This latter subset of "a priori codes" provided analytic categories for tracking the dimensions of school information in parent-Navigator interactions. Because these deductive codes have broad definitions, I found it advantageous to delineate subcodes for some original codes. For instance, I split "information" into "types," "sources," "personalization" and other aspects; then further divided "types" into "metrics," "narratives," and "online" to specify the specific attributes of these broader codes. Table 2 provides definitions and the associated codes corresponding to these parent codes.

Prior to coding, I compared audio files to automated transcripts to fix discrepancies. Then, in the first phase of coding, I re-read the transcripts of three key informants to identify codes for a codebook. These codes pertained to key notions connected to the research questions as well as words and ideas that participants repeated. During this first stage of inductive coding, I used several exploratory coding techniques to guide the kinds of attributions I selected for the codebook. For instance, when compiling codes for a codebook, I used the following approaches: initial and in vivo coding, which derive from participants own words; descriptive coding, which

helps illustrate the context and characteristics of participants; process coding, which describes actions; emotion coding, which captures participant feelings; and evaluation coding, which reveals significance or worth, to participants, of focal aspects of the study (Saldana, 2016). The goal of this first phase of coding was to listen carefully to participants and keep an open mind given the exploratory nature of the study. Following the creation of a codebook, I uploaded inductive and deductive codes, transcripts and memos to NVivo qualitative analysis software and coded the remaining transcripts to complete the first cycle of coding.[48] At this stage, I identified additional in vivo codes and attributed the code "information – other" to instances that did not fit with my coding schema.

Table 2: Codebook

Part 1: A Priori Codes Related to Information for School Selection

To address an expanding and disintegrated scholarly subspace, this analysis synthesizes extant research on school information as it pertains to school choice. It employs a scoping review to examine the range and types of research activity on this topic and offers a condensed overview of findings and gaps in this body literature (Booth et al., 2012).

Theme	Definition	Associated Codes
Info – Content	Academic or nonacademic descriptive features of schools, faculty and students, particularly the subject matter of the knowledge	Reputation, performance, growth, safety, "faculty member-parent interactions," diverse teaching staff, teachers from NOLA, operational competence, logistical items, extended day

[48] The "first cycle" of coding, or first time that codes were placed on all transcripts, comprised the first phase (i.e., identifying codes for a codebook in three transcripts) and the second phase (i.e., coding all transcripts using designated codes). Qualitative researchers use different language to describe stages of coding, and I tend to follow Saldana (2016). Regardless of chosen terms, coding or data interpretation ought to be iterative, systematic, and concurrent with data collection (Maxwell, 2012).

		programs, reputation, "climate of CMO"
Info – Type	The way that content is constructed, visualized, configured, to conveyed to the audience; how the materials show up	Letter grades, growth vs proficiency ratings, school org rubric, advertisement, IEP, the story behind the grade
Info – Source	Authority or origin that generates and shares content or assertions. This category explains who or whom information ultimately comes from	Personal networks of Navigators, walking the halls, district website, school open house
Info – Access	The means through which knowledge becomes available or is disseminated and the requirements and actions needed for obtaining it	Parent friendly reports, reading level, jargon, what's behind the letter grade
Info – Personalization	The way that knowledge and its delivery is shaped by or designed to address the interests, expectations, or needs of individuals	Navigator opinions or recommendations, school visits, families' definition of a good school, extra process
Info – Relationality	Social relationship or connection that underpins knowledge exchange	Go to
Info – Schools' preferences	Requirements for student admission that may determine placement on waitlist or special criteria for enrollment	Test school, waitlist, sibling priority
Information – other	Other aspects of information not included in the above subcodes	student records, past performance, "fluffing the data," "high-level data" or aggregated information, "manipulating the match," image vs. reality

Part 2: Additional Inductive Codes

Theme	Definition	Associated Codes
Assistance	Support that goes beyond providing parents with school information. Assisting parents with completing enrollment procedures (e.g., filling out forms, attending open houses)	Translating (district info or Eduspeak), filtering, interpreting, helping parents read data reports

Strategies - Accountability	Holding parents accountable to agreements and goals set in foundational meeting	tough love, "come to Jesus moment," honesty, getting past egos, accountability is love
Strategies - Empowerment	Sharing knowledge of process and schools with parents Encouraging parents to ask questions and contact school personnel	Teaching, empowering, developing confidence, being creative, you can't be afraid to ask, modeling, realizing agency, Navigator's role gets smaller over time
Strategies - OneApp	Related to navigating the enrollment system and preferences	Cueing reminding, prioritizing, prompting, considering more schools vs narrowing, gamesmanship
Strategies - other	Various other approaches that Navigators took that they believed would be beneficial	goal setting, tempering expectations, being realistic about chances, persuasion
Navigator attributes	These are values and approaches that effective Navigators use or practice	Honesty, empathizing, quickly building trust and rapports, insider, speak same language, similar upbringing and educational experience, relate, consistent communication, sharing experiences, read the room, telling them my story, Navigator's role changes and gets smaller over time, same race/ ethnicity
Challenges	Parent or Navigator – challenge in the relationship	Overwhelmed by number of schools, manpower, lack of responsiveness, facing competing interests, time, threat of a more informed parent base, schools not communicating with parents, students mistreated, staff turnover, not enough A and B schools
Making a difference	Meaningfully improving parents' school selection experience over what it would be without this support	Surveying families, comparing those supported to those not, placed in a school with a higher SPS score, better student behavior, improved grades, consider

		additional schools vs. narrowing, improving schools
Parents goals		Knowing what I can do to help my child be successful
NGO Goals		"What parent wants, parent gets," ed is a service
Communication	Modes	"the app," texting, visiting workplace, email, phone
Advocacy	In district and with CMOs	Elevating trends, pushing the envelope, identify big trends in the system for families, "red flag" schools, "unappreciated performers", communicating with NOLA PS, persuading school leaders and CMOs, helping families we can't get in front of

Several matrices or graphic displays aided meaning making, particularly after the cycle of coding. Matrices may serve various purposes in qualitative studies, with one being an opportunity to spread out the data and sort data in order to make initial comparisons and contrasts between cases (Miles et al., 2014). For instance, I created a six-column "participant-level display for partially ordered meta-matrix" (Miles et al., 2014) to illustrate each participant's essential response on the following key points in the study: what participants want in schools, what participants want from the organization, characteristics of information EN shares, forms and attributes of assistance, challenges that Navigators and parents encounter, and potential for scaling up or systematizing Navigator services. With this shorthand recording, I created a first glance of data on certain topics that I could view for each participant (i.e., looking across rows) and between participants (i.e., up and down columns). This tool was useful for quickly identifying preliminary descriptive patterns, which would be tested through reviewing the depth and specificity of related evidence. Separately, and after the first round of coding, I arrayed

codes in an Excel spreadsheet and assessed the number of attributions, examples, and definitions of each. While NVivo provides the number of statements for each code and visual display capabilities, I preferred the spreadsheet as a way to easily list and rearrange codes by moving columns on and between sheets. Mapping codes onto a simple table helped me see where I could collapse similar codes and determine which codes were directly related to focus of this study.

Moving coded data around graphic displays helps a researcher begin to formulate explanations (Miles et al., 2014), though it temporarily sacrifices depth of and context for coded participant statements (Maxwell, 2012). To analyze data in more depth, I used NVivo to create query results for codes with high frequencies, which suggested participants had much to say on this topic, and those directly tied to research questions. Reading a set of query results gave me the chance to see all statements related to a code and enabled me to manually annotate each and eventually partition statements according to my interpretation.[49] In several cases I then listed the different kinds of statements that were coded for a broader code (e.g., interpretive assistance) and noted the frequency of participant comments since these quasi statistics or word counts are one way to make meaning (Leech & Omwuegbuzie, 2007). Moving around these query results for specific codes on a Word document also allowed me to sort and group similar statements. Taken together, sorting quotations and tabulating codes helped me to form initial hypotheses about the evidence "by contrasting, comparing, replicating, cataloguing, and classifying the objects of the study" (Creswell, 2009, p. 178).

Second cycle coding entailed several procedures that allowed me to categorize codes and quotations into patterns. This process of consolidating initial sets of codes into patterns is known as pattern coding (Saldana, 2016). To collapse codes and assign them to broader groups

[49] It also allowed me to eliminate mistakenly coded comments.

according to a patterns or relationship among codes, I did three different activities. First, I made a new chart with the title of the patten codes as column titles and placed original codes beneath them in rows. Second, I looked back at query results for single original codes to see if annotations aligned to these new patterns or suggested a new cluster that was not captured in the pattern codes. Third, I engaged in a code mapping strategy that helped me consider relationships between codes by variables by writing down and cutting out pattern and original codes and rearranging them. This traditional approach allowed me to create different views by easily repositioning codes, a process that helped me infer trends and distinctions and disconfirm some initial hunches as I worked to condense data and understand conceptual linkages.

Following the recommendation of Miles and coauthors (2014), I wrote a memo about each pattern code to detail my interpretation of the way first cycle codes fit together. Memos are short or extended commentaries that capture researcher reflections on and tend to be offhand reflexive responses to input. Stake (1995) comments that "the experienced researcher writes up the observation while it is still fresh" (p. 62), so I wrote memos after each interview and informal conversation and jottings, which describe less lengthy and refined memos, after reading each blogpost and article. At times, these vignettes helped me summarize recurring points, key questions, potential themes, or pertinent points related to research questions. By saving memos in Microsoft Word, I could then import the notes into NVivo where I coded, arranged, and compared them. Memo writing was a testament to the deceptively simple researcher insight that writing is analysis rather than the product of it (Miles et al., 2014). All of these data analysis techniques – coding and sub-coding, graphically depicting and rearranging data, jotting and writing memos – offer lanes that allow research to move from observations to supported

assertions and later to conclusions. However, additional data processes were required to further condense data and generate grounded conclusions.

Positionality

Given that the researcher is the "primary instrument in data collection" (Creswell, 2009, p. 187), and perhaps especially so in qualitative research, it is important to identify the way aspects of my identity affect all parts of this study. As a White cisgender male residing in the Midwest, and as an education researcher, there are numerous cultural, linguistic, experiential and other differences between me and many of the participants of this study. EN deliberately recruits individuals who share similarities with the (mostly Black) population of parents in New Orleans. My position as a White man undoubtedly influences the kinds and quality of interactions I have with participants, as well as the way I interpret their messages or intended meaning, perhaps leading to misunderstandings or missed cues, communication styles, and nonverbal messages that I am not familiar with. This section acknowledges several of these gaps and the relevance my identity and reflexivity inevitably have in the research process; it also points to some strategies I take in conducting this study to reduce the way differences between me and many of those involved in my research will distort the efficacy of this analysis.

In spite of these differences, some aspects of my positionality create commonness with participants and potentially lead to a deeper understanding of their experiences. I am an educator, a former New Orleanian, and a parent of school-aged children. In New Orleans, I held positions as a public-school teacher and private-school administrator from 2010-2016, and I have returned to the city at least annually since relocating. As a result, I am familiar with the educational landscape (i.e., names of schools and neighborhoods, major policies, and individuals in district,

CMO, and school leadership). Additionally, as an educator in the city, I coached athletics and helped coordinate a parent-teacher group, which are experiences that helped me gain awareness of some families' concerns and educational experiences. Given that many of the Navigators are former teachers, counselors, and school leaders, some shared awareness, expectations, and language have been an asset in helping me quickly build rapport and listen with more attention to nuance.

With some potential problems of positionality and bias in mind, I approach the study with a sensitivity to certain threats to validity and take measures to enhance my trustworthiness as an instrument of the research (Maxwell, 2012). For instance, I conducted member checks so that participants can review the main messages I am heard in the interviews and offer different interpretation and corrections as needed (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I engaged in peer debriefs with colleagues and mentors, which tended to challenge my observations, assertions, and potential biases. Writing reflective memos after interviews has also allowed me to identify some missed opportunities and mistakes that I have made as an interviewer.[50] Ultimately, researcher positionality is a set of characteristics, which shape the totality of the research and should be a factor when readers judge the power of the findings, rather than a set of assets or differences-as-problems that can be minimized.

Ethical Considerations

This study poses minimal risk to those who participated. Consequently, the University of Maryland's Institutional Review Board deemed this project "Exempt". Still, given the small number of personnel at EN, there is some risk of breach of confidentiality for participants.

[50] In a subsequent section, I elaborate more fully on these validity strategies.

Specifically, some statements may be traceable to certain employees, especially if the commentary involves rich contextual information or is made by an individual in a unique role. I took several measures to de-identify participants including aggregating data, using pseudonyms and applying general descriptors, like "managers" or "administrators." As a precaution, I explained these conditions clearly in the consent form and discussed these measures as questions arose in several instances. I also informed participants that they were free to skip any questions that they do not wish to answer.

Limitations

I have approached the phenomenon and individuals being studied with predetermined limits and assumptions. In the course of the analysis, additional limitations became apparent, particularly in terms of access to data sources. A brief discussion of the delimitations, assumptions and limitations of the study lends clarity to conclusions and lessons this study provides. Notably, the sample poses a limitation to what we may learn about this NGO and the nature of its parental assistance. Specifically, the small parent sample – which is due in part to constraints related to time, distance, connections to insiders, and daily demands on these individuals – leaves me unable to evaluate aspects of this NGO's information and assistance from a key perspective. This study set out to understand parents as situated actors experiencing the effects of policies (Cooper, 2007; Ellison & Aloe, 2019) and it specified direct observation, additional interviews, and follow-up questionnaires to do so, but unfortunately this goal and slate of methods represent a limitation on the depth and comprehensiveness of my results.[51]

[51] Being immersed in everyday life in this setting would have been helpful and valuable to my understanding. Despite an initial offer by leaders of the organization, I was unable to conduct participant observation of counseling sessions. Additional modes of data collection complement interviews and documents, which were largely self-reported in this case, as sustained time "in the field" is a core means to enhance validity (Creswell, 2009). A greater

This study aims to generate new theoretical propositions about NGO information and assistance for school selection, but it is further limited by particularity in that it is qualitative analysis of a single organization in a local setting. Accordingly, it is not generalizable in a manner that population-oriented studies are. It also may not speak to causality in terms of social relationships or school decisions, but instead describes these phenomena within the New Orleans context. One delimitation in this study is that it covers 2016-2022, a range that precedes a phase of redevelopment in EN's service model in the final months of 2022 and early 2023 that seeks to make Navigators "specialists" in specific areas (e.g., Special Education) rather than "generalists. EN also differs from other NGOs that do similar work, like Oakland REACH, by partnering with employers to be a worker benefit. This condition disqualifies parents who are underemployed or unable to work and suggests that the population of EN parents, who must initiate the service to use it, are potentially more motivated to conduct a school search than some peers. These differences and delimitations mean that we may be able to generalize to theoretical propositions about the kinds of information support that these NGOs provide and need to remain mindful of some specific circumstances that set EN (within this timeframe) apart from other NGOs.

Addressing Potential Concerns about Reliability and Validity

To safeguard and strengthen the validity of my claims, I followed recognized data collection and analysis strategies such as triangulation, examining rival hypotheses, and engaging in peer debriefs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). According to Creswell (2009), validity refers to the accuracy of results based on the parameters of the study. In this study, I collect varied and rich data about NGO-provided school information and assistance, particularly from

presence in New Orleans would have also allowed me to depend less on more reductive forms of communication like teleconference and telephone calls.

in-depth interviews. These conversations allow me to compare and contrast related experiences side by side and, in conjunction with other artifacts, enable me to locate convergence between participants' experiences and with supplementary sources. Thus, this study engages in two of the five forms of data triangulation that Denzin and Lincoln (2005) illustrate: triangulating between evidence types and different sources.[52] By looking for instances of corroboration between data points, rival hypotheses are sometimes illuminated. I use a technique of addressing these discrepant data as a way to enhance validity and do so by calling attention to assertions that are inconsistent with my general findings. These rival hypotheses may suggest shortcomings in conclusions or indicate particular individual experiences or contexts, though the process of questioning and examining their potential causes may strengthen the credibility of claims (Maxwell, 2012).

I also engaged in several other strategies to increase the trustworthiness of the study. As noted, I conducted member checks and wrote analytic memos to reflect on my thinking processes during data collection and compose a mid-stream report of results (Miles et al., 2014). This study benefits from peer debrief with researcher colleagues and mentors. This scrutiny and feedback helped me test the rationality and persuasiveness of explanations and evidence. Moreover, I provided thick, rich description in findings. This detailed accounting for context makes findings less impressionistic and may help "transports readers to the setting" (Merriam, 1988, p. 118). Additionally, in justifying my findings, I link theoretical constructs of information and assistance to quotations in logic models. Explicitly connecting data points to broader concepts in this way

[52] Denzin and Lincoln (2005) distinguish five forms of triangulation by which researchers tend to corroborate data; we can engage in triangulation by data sources, modes of inquiry, different researchers, theory, and evidence types (e.g., text, audio, statistics)

demonstrates “chains of evidence” for readers (Yin, 2013). In total, these techniques contribute to a more systematic study that addresses the full range of data with appropriate scrutiny.

In Closing

Case study offers a viable methodological approach for this exploratory, descriptive study of NGO information and assistance with school selection. Driven by in-depth interviews and supported by additional documentary sources, analysis of case data generates empirical insights about the way this NGO approaches knowledge and parent support with school decisions. As such, this case has potential to be revelatory by shedding new light on an understudied phenomenon, and one that researchers had little prior access to (Yin, 2013). Researchers have used case study designs to draw lessons on families’ school decisions in choice contexts (Bell, 2009; Olson-Beal & Hendry, 2012; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015; Delale-O’Connor, 2019), but no case study examines NGO-parent collaboration for school selection. Through systematically adhering to the research methods detailed in this chapter, this exploratory case sheds light on the specifics of this case and develops new theoretical propositions about the role of NGO based decision assistance and personalized information in K-12 school decisions. In the following section, I present the results of these modes of analysis as answers to my research questions.

Chapter 4: Findings

Navigators contend that parents not only need information support and assistance with school decisions, but time, perspective, and understanding to make those decisions well. This chapter explores the evidence associated with these three main themes, illustrating what members of EdNavigator (EN) think parents need in terms of information and assistance and how Navigators support parents in obtaining what they think parents need.[53] To clarify basic details and questions about EN upfront, this chapter begins with a brief descriptive sketch. Then I explain each theme using evidence primarily from the Navigators who participated in interviews.

Contextual Features of EN

EN is able to harness local knowledge and experience by hiring young educators from the community, mostly former teachers, counselors, and administrators [as Table 2 in Chapter 3 demonstrates]. For instance, one Navigator, Daphney, was a math and special education elementary school teacher in New Orleans prior to becoming a Navigator. Many Navigators are from the same neighborhoods as parent-clients and some are parents themselves. Together, these attributes provide "deep expertise in the region," according to Joseph, and "experience that parents really valued," from Gabriella's perspective. Most Navigators with whom I spoke are Black and several are Latinx, similar to the "primarily Black and Brown low-income families" (Andre) EN serves. These shared characteristics aided in establishing insider credibility and

[53] Because this is an exploratory study that asks broad questions (i.e., about information, assistance) and responses vary by Navigator experience and individual parent, responses are numerous. Listing these dimensions of information in tables below helps convey additional data concisely and comparatively without overcomplicating the Findings narrative.

helped build relationships with families.[54] There's some evidence to suggest that Navigators' work in local schools also helped them get access to and maintain awareness of changes taking place in schools or CMOs, although several Navigators mentioned difficulties securing records, getting into schools, and "connecting" (Ja'Niya) with parents in distant and unfamiliar schools, such as those across Lake Pontchartrain.

The target clients for EN are "lower-wage workers, who may struggle with working multiple jobs, be single parents, and face language barriers" (Edweek.org). These primarily hourly workers tended to be "housekeepers, maintenance workers and medical assistants" (EdNavblog). Some parents that EN serves are undocumented workers and grandparents. Parents meet Navigators through worker benefit arrangements between EN and area businesses, particularly in the hospitality industries, which pay subscription fees to EN because, leaders at the NGO suggest, the service may reduce worker turnover (The74million.org). One article described their compensation for Navigators as such: "hotels pay a $250 sign-up fee for each employee, then $37.50 monthly per employee," that the "International House budgeted about $6,700 for the year," and "Marriott spent about $15,000 in 2016." Proponents argue that "EN seems to hit that sweet spot of enabling businesses to do well while doing good" (Robinson, 2017). Eventually, the organization incorporated university partnerships with Tulane, Loyola, and MIT. MIT's website states that the program is "available at no cost to current MIT benefits-eligible staff, faculty, and postdocs" (hr.mit.edu/worklife/edNavigator). The inclusion of university communities brought in more middle class and affluent parents – a change one Navigator described as a strategic concession to advance the organization's ultimate goal of

[54] Leaders of the organization, however, are former top executives of The New Teacher Project or TNTP, an organization that trains teachers and, though several of them lived in New Orleans for a time, do not share racial, ethnic, or place of origin characteristics with most parents who use the service.

serving lower-wage workers.[55] At their "peak," one Navigator and manager (Noreen) said that the New Orleans office had seven Navigators who served a total of just over 700 families.[56]

Historically, Navigators went to parents' workplaces to initiate conversations. One Navigator observed how EN had "really unique access to the back of the house." Ja'Niya went on to explain, "We set up shop in the breakroom" and held conversations during employee breaks, lunchtimes, or following shifts. Most Navigators, with the exception of one, saw these workplace meetings as well received. One Navigator commented, "They used to love to see us coming… Everyone would pop in" (Noreen). Parents could also contact Navigators by email, phone calls, text messages, or web application." From Noreen's perspective, accommodating parents was especially helpful before the OneApp centralized system facilitated enrollment for students in the 2015-2016 schoolyear. She said, "you were getting families with 3 different schedules, 3 different schools, and sometimes 3 different ways to grade." Some journalists went so far as to say this worker benefit approach was, "flipping traditional models of family involvement" (The74million.org), as parents were not required to meet Navigators at schools during times that were typically convenient for educators, such as just after school.

Navigators attempted to meet parents where they are in another sense, as well: they sought to understand the kinds of schools that parents wanted and helped them find options that might fit those interests. Several Navigators said, "Families are the ones who drive this process" (Ava); "Whatever the parent wants, the parent gets" (Amna); and "It's what the parents want" (Gabriella). Reportedly, the process of getting to know parents' needs and school preferences begins with getting to know parents as people. A blogpost entitled "What does navigating

[55] Interpretations of working with university employees differed among Navigators though, as another employee stated, "We weren't targeting our target demographic at all" (Gia).
[56] Another long-time Navigator corroborated this number. Also, the Orleans office had considerably more Navigators and clients than the Boston branch.

education really mean?" states, "For us, it means understanding where each family wants to go and doing whatever it takes to help them get there."[57] The process begins as Navigators "ask pointed questions to them [parents] about what do you really want in a school?" or "what do you think makes a good school?" Across this examination of parents' interests and perceptions of desirable schools, relationship building is a key priority for Navigators. As one Navigator explained, "The main part of the work is getting to know parents," and another Navigator stressed that this process was "ongoing" (Noreen). Additionally, "a lot of talking" is how some Navigators seemed to characterize information exchanges.[58] These initial efforts to build rapport with a family looked different depending on parents' assets and needs. Isabella pointed out, "when you build a relationship with a family, you start to uncover other needs to address." From her perspective attending issues of food insecurity or residential stability were primary; she asserted, "You are navigating the realities of the human experience and trying to manage expectations about what goals are realistic." Navigators' comments suggest that relationship building was a central aim, and it is intuitive how closeness might facilitate collaboration, though it would be valuable to look at these bonds from parents' point of view especially given the some Navigators' heavy caseloads.

EN engages in various services pertaining to school information and parental assistance, of which school choice support may be one of the most "concrete" (Matt). An administrator at the NGO noted these services entailed "cradle to college support" (Jacob). This array of services is captured in a Human Resources flyer for Loyola University:

[57] Further, the article goes on to article a vision of "navigating education" as "Asking the right questions," "Translating school-speak," "Insisting on action," Improving communication," Making the options manageable," and "Being there at critical moments."
[58] Later, I return to modes of communication and likely reasons why parents preferred verbal communication.

> choosing schools and navigating OneApp; ensuring your child is on track in school; supporting your child's education at home; communicating with teachers and school officials; interpreting test score reports and report cards; preparing for college; and advancing your own education as an adult.

In gathering data, the relative amount of time and work Navigators spent on each purpose was unclear. EN advised parents of students in several closing schools, such as Singleton Charter School and Arise Academy in 2021-2022, which were attempting to "shuttle students to sister schools" (Noreen), or encourage students to enroll in a nearby school where an agreement allowed them entry regardless of their broader options.

The organization has also been active in regional and nationwide advocacy through ongoing conversations with district leaders and a substantial social media presence.[59] Its media messages combine soft-edged criticism about school reform with vague, virtuous-sounding statements about the organization's support services. For example, the Walton Foundation offered this quote from a veteran Navigator: "I realized that many of the changes that were designed to help families like mine, such as higher standards and greater school choice, had inadvertently made the system more confusing and frustrating, especially in the short term." At the local level, managers reported that EN seeks to "elevate trends in school performance" (Andre) to district and CMO leaders, hoping to effect school improvement and, in some cases, school closures. These advocacy roles overlap with EN's mission "to provide personalized support that helps busy families and caregivers keep their children on the path to a great

[59] In addition to their website and blogs on Medium and their own platform, EN has numerous features in education-related publications and news websites, including the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the Hechinger Report, The74million.org, Chalkbeat.org, EdWeek, Eduwonk, EdPost, K-12divereport, The Education Gadfly Show, the Detroit Free Press, WWNO.org, Nola.com, neworleansmom.com, NOLA Family Magazine, the Center for Reinventing Public Education, the Walton foundation, and the Shah Foundation. EN disseminates stories and promotional materials via Facebook posts and tweets on Twitter.

education" (EdNavigator.org). In some instances, media outlets that receive funding from the same sources as EN (i.e., Gates Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, and Walton Foundation), like The74.org, generate a substantial amount of positive publicity for the NGO, raising questions about the shared interests and agendas of the three informal partners.

Theme 1: "One of The Biggest Things Is Time"

Parents need time to engage in school decision processes. Navigators recognize that parents have time deficits, which they see as largely the result of busy and inflexible work schedules, single parenthood, or being a grandparent raising a young child. Andre remarked that "parents don't have the time and energy to go to schools." Other Navigators repeatedly used the term "overwhelmed" to describe parents' viewpoints, as in: "I can understand when you feel like you don't have the time or its overwhelming" (Amna); "The sheer number of schools is overwhelming" (Ava); or "it could be very overwhelming for parents" (Noreen). Several Navigators acknowledge parents work schedules as the prime source of time challenges, as when Andre stated, "The biggest reason that parents don't engage more at school is that they're working, and they have to earn a living." Wage-earning parents in particular may struggle to manage the "friction of time and distance" (Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 1995, p. 61) involved in searching for schools, unlike higher-income parents who have more opportunities to participate and, according to Isabella, "wanted to be more of an active participant, physically, than a parent who has less time, given their work schedule and they're just like general capacity, understanding of the system." Several parents agreed that having less time makes school selection challenging to complete on their own. A parent, Victoria, shared,

> It's frustrating, it's like you're working all day and then you sit [at] like 8, 9, 10 o'clock at night and try to pull out information online. I just spent hours looking for information and I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one.

Victoria emigrated to the US and is a single mother of a third grader in New Orleans; she has worked with Noreen intermittently across five years.[60] An article in the The74million.org portrayed another parent as "worried" because "she has no car, and, as a single parent, she can't afford to take more time off work to pick him [her son] up if he's suspended again." Even parents with transportation or a supportive partner may struggle in "a context where parents will not have the time or energy to go to 70 plus schools" (Andre). So, primarily, Navigators as agents add time by performing tasks that would otherwise involve parents in lengthy search activities.

Solutions to this problem, or of parents "feeling very insignificant" (Isabella), come from the Navigators' time and experience. Navigators had opportunities to learn about enrollment processes and travel between schools. Amna pointed out, "I've learned those things over the years because I've had the space and time." Partnering with Navigators may allow parents access to expertise on community schools, as well guidance and flexible support that can offset some time-related barriers. According to Joseph, one way that EN supports parents is by "communicating information to parents the way that they [are] able to understand it on their time schedule," because Navigators "have the bandwidth to be able to walk parents through it" (Joseph). Though these advisors may have had the extra "bandwidth" to communicate on parents' schedules, limited insight about parent approval of services raises questions of how and when communication occurred at the right time, as parents saw it. Navigators repeatedly

[60] She recently learned that her employer no longer subscribed to EN's services but her Navigator, Noreen, continues to assist Victoria and her child on a voluntary basis.

discussed working around parents' schedules so that communication was convenient, using phone calls, in-person meetings, an app, and text messages. Ava pointed out, "a lot of these families are working have little time" so Navigators "make it easier" by meeting at their workplace. Table 3 displays a number of other forms of assistance (like filling in for a parent at a school tour), or informational support (like breaking down data on specific schools that parents asked about). Table 3 is clustered around the following categories of assistance: augmenting logistical needs, clarifying complexity, strategizing, and solving problems. Many of these supports were meant to accommodate parents and address their time and capacity constraints.

Table 3

Types of Assistance Parents Seek, According to Navigators

Assistance	Example
Schedule/ remind	"They are helping you to not miss the dates of applications or open house dates."
Meet at parents' workplace	"Really unique access to the back of the house [hotel employee breakroom]"
Attend events	"Sometimes standing in for a parent"
Obtain children's school records	"The first thing we do is get them to sign a FERPA; We need access to their records."
Technical assistance	Getting online and completing the OneApp
"Translate data" or "Edu-speak"	"A lot of times they would just show us the data they had (scores, etc) and we'd walk them through data.
Prepare parents to speak w/ personnel	"I can prime you on the questions you want to ask the school leader and go with you on a visit."
Field parent inquiries	"I was able to call her with all my questions, whatever it was regarding my child and if she didn't know the answer, she was like, okay, give me a day or two."
Interpret information	"Based on what's most important to them, dissect that information"
Provide guidance	"She got my goals. She was filling out what Mom wants and also what the child needed. And then with all this information, she tried to pull out the right schools."
Compiling a choice set	Identify "underappreciated performers" and "red flag schools (to avoid)
"Gamesmanship"	"Help me rank schools"
Advise on seat availability	"We valued information like whether the schools had any seats."
Temper expectations	"I know why you're picking A and B schools; I get it. But the reality is you're going to have to take a deeper dive in some of the C schools… you're not the only family thinking about that particular school."

Visualize outcomes	"When they don't have a seat, it means you have to go into Round two, which means your chance to get into some of those the next tier schools goes down."
Debunk misconception	Schools advertised high growth ratings though they had low proficiency ratings
Solve problems	"Needed immediate help, something's wrong"
Educational triage	I may ask, what's your biggest issue you're having now with the current school?
Refer to other services	"There's lot of figuring out like what belongs to me and what belongs to a different Navigator [outside the organization]."
Offer general guidance	"Wanted someone to tell them what to do"
Periodically checking-in	"We do an intake, then check-in from time to time. We had an app. Some families liked email. They tended to ignore phone calls. Email or texting was the best."

Several Navigators identified a psychological component to time usage and perceptions of time deficits. As Amna put it, "The more time you think you have, the more time you can confidently and comfortably allocate to the process." She explained that because of her experience she felt comfortable using fragments of time to email a teacher about her child's grades or read about schools on her phone during her downtime. Navigators' ongoing attention to parents might help boost comfort and confidence, which in turn may help them navigate school selection differently. A veteran Navigator and manager, Noreen, drew a comparison between EN and the one-time support the district provided through its three Family Resource Centers (FRC). She stated, "That one-time 15-minute consultation doesn't really help you narrow the universe of choice and options for you because you really could use some longer-term support. You don't get that resource center 24/7." Her usage of "24/7" indicated her views that EN was timelier and more consistent in addressing parents' needs than FRCs.

Another Navigator suggested that parents felt their time was being wasted when they could not get to hear honest opinions from those whom they sought for help. Matt explained that parents wanted to get to the point and hear from district officials, "If we were in your shoes,

here's where we'd look first." Working with Navigators, on the other hand, may provide some relief and logistical assistance, though the rates at which this occurred and for whom remain opaque. The continuous partnership and opportunities to advance a conversation may help parents get to a point of self-awareness about educational goals for their children that tends to require time and discernment. Consequently, these parents may be better able to compile a preferred list of schools and match to one they feel fits their child.

Theme 2: Perspective

Navigators claimed to provide parents with a unique perspective, based on access to data sources and their own experience (Table 4). Both types of school knowledge made Navigators credible in the eyes of working parents. As Ja'Niya said, "Parents saw us as in the trenches." Victoria, a parent, stated, "Noreen visited a lot of schools. She would talk about her own experience [of] what she had seen in the school, what she knew. That's what you want to hear. You don't pull that stuff out of a website." She continued:

> I don't know if she had attended classes in the schools, but I completely trusted her judgment. Parents can't go in there and attend the class, we don't have contact with the principal, and you have to talk to them. That's what Noreen did and all the information and her feeling about how she thinks about the school, she gave that back to me.

Her Navigator combined this access with her experience as a successful teacher and principal in the city. Navigators drew on and synthesized a range of data sources to advise parents, including its own network of parent-clients, school leaders, and Navigators' experiences; district ratings and state standardized test scores; and information provided by schools and charter management organizations (CMOs) themselves. Undoubtedly, advisors were offering insights "you don't pull

out of a website" at times, though the range of experience among Navigators and, later, their different geographic contexts, suggest that not all information stemmed from firsthand experience.

Table 4

Navigator Sources of Knowledge for School Decisions

Source of Knowledge	Description/ Characteristics	Example
District website and ratings	Includes "growth" and "proficiency" ratings	"We would always start with the district information."
Schools standardized test scores		"We relied heavily on LEAP test data"
Professional experience		"A lot of what's shared with families came from my own experience as a classroom teacher"
Personal or parental experiences in system		"My own experience navigating the system for my own family or supporting them."
"Landscape analysis" (Joseph)	EN conducted informal school tours using a rubric.	"The parents can't go in there and attend the class, we don't have contact with the principal, and you get to talk to them."
"Collective expertise"	Includes monthly professional development among Navigators	"a lot of collaboration between Navigators"
Colleague, friend networks	Often word-of-mouth about assessments of changes in schools, programs, or personnel	"We're always talking to our friends and folks in our network just to kind of like get a sense of like what the climate is in schools or in CMOs."
Local school expertise		"When we work with families from the city, we want the families to build that trust that is rooted in both relationship and credibility that someone that looks like the BPS, can speak multiple languages."
Conversations w/ parents affiliated with EN	Conversations or questionnaires about school experiences from current families	

Table 4 illustrates the variety of knowledge sources participants reportedly leveraged in advising families and examples of each. This depth and variety of sources is part of what can gave Navigators' valuable perspective. Navigators see themselves looking both across and into schools, "a 10,000-foot view of a system that was on the ground for parents" (Noreen).

Cultivating this expertise begins with selecting Navigators with deep experience in education and "close ties to their community" (Isabella). About her own background she stated, "I've taught both in charter schools and a traditional public school, so I think that gave way to understanding different school settings." She added, "I've done a lot of advocacy work in the city through nonprofits and advocacy groups. I'm also a graduate of [the district] and have been here forever, so I have close ties to individuals in the schools." While her range of positions was unusual, her experiences matched those of other Navigators, like Amna, who exclaimed, "I know the city and I know education, I know New Orleans education." These locals, educators, and (in some cases) fellow parents garner a degree of legitimacy in collaborating with parents or guiding them to (or from) schools.

Connections to the local education context helped Navigators get their foot in the door, but it also gives them a unique insider-outsider status insofar as they are also members of an education nonprofit unaffiliated with the district and tasked with evaluating and comparing schools. As insiders, they work with school leaders and personnel as well as other members of NGOs. In some ways, these networks could represent super "grapevines" flush with localized informal knowledge.[61] Andre explained,

> New Orleans is very much a relational town so it's really about who you know, and I'm really proud to say that those of us on the ground in New Orleans are pretty well connected and still really plugged into the educational scene. Obviously, we're in it, but also, we're former teachers and counselors, so we're always talking to our friends and folks in our network just to get a sense of what the climate is in schools or CMOs. And

[61] In their article, "'I Heard It on the Grapevine': Hot Knowledge and School Choice," Ball and Vincent (1998) draw on interviews with 172 parents to describe the grapevine as a pervasive form of knowledge and guidance drawn from the impressions of friends, neighbors, and relatives; that is embedded in social and local context, comprised of affective experience and feeling, and "more reliable than official sources of information" (p. 380).

> we use that information right, again it's not scientific at all, but it's valuable because it's coming directly from folks who are actually in the mix.

These associations may have several benefits for Navigators who possess them, like keeping them up to date since, "Year to year it's very different in New Orleans" (Noreen). They also provide data about schools that is difficult to obtain and may add to their credibility in the eyes of parents who see them as well connected. Finally, these data have an instrumental value in helping Navigators assess changes in schools and, consequently, shifting the way they guide families. At the same time, it is tough to imagine that school personnel were willing to be entirely transparent with EN, who they knew might favor or disfavor their school in conversations with families.

To complement these networks and the publicly available data (e.g., school guide, LEAP scores, NOPS website), Navigators sometimes tapped an internal evaluation system that relies on school visits – some unplanned – and Navigators' scoring and observation, which EN described as "landscape analysis" (Joseph). Using a rubric, Navigators rated schools in order to identify "red flag" schools that they warned parents against and "unappreciated performer" schools that they saw as overlooked but demonstrating growth or high performance. Several Navigators referenced this practice, but it did not appear to be systematic or a major source of their guidance or time usage. Nor did Navigators seem obligated to follow this organizational knowledge when counseling parents. Still, these inspections provided valuable knowledge about the feel and quality of interactions in different buildings, which one Navigator said, are "not shared through the [district] data" (Amna). Coupled with network information, these visits supplement performance indicators by speaking to "the experience that students are going to have when they're there" (Matt). They may also illuminate other school attributes of interest to parents.

Deriving information from various systems and personal experiences, as counselors do, indicates that they probably used their discretion in fronting certain data; the mixture of sources also makes it difficult to identify why Navigators advise parents or evaluate schools as they do.

Table 5

Navigators' Report of Characteristics or Content about Schools Parents Seek

Content	Example
"best" or highly rated school	"A lot of parents just want their kids to be in the best schools meaning, you know, high performing schools."
Alignment of school hours, location to schedule	"Given their work schedule and their ecosystem, like, I am a single parent, and I don't have anyone in this city to help me pick up [my kids] at school."
School culture	"School culture just constantly comes up because that is the heart and soul of a school."
Nearby	
Safety	Comfort and trust in the place, sense that school is welcoming
Student diversity	
Language immersion or has second language program	
"Operational competence"	"Meetings called last minute, conferences with no notice, buses that are late or unsafe"
Sports or extracurricular programs	
Extended day services	
Special Education program details	
Class size	

Table 5 displays the various attributes about schools that parents privileged while arranging a choice set, according to members of EN. Most Navigators agreed that, for parents, "the number one thing is what is the best school to put my kid in?" (Ja'Niya), which were often but not always associated with those having a high district rating. According to Navigators, many families viewed "the best" schools as "high performing schools" (Ava). Longtime Navigators and managers affirmed, "A family's primary thing was 'I want my child to go to an A school'" (Andre) and "Parents become hyper concerned about a letter grade," even if "they don't have a

clue what goes into it" (Amna). Amna was particularly concerned that some schools promoted their growth score in a way that was misleading, as schools' proficiency scores might still be low even if growth scores were commendable. Regardless of the schools that parents initially preferred, Navigators drew attention to other characteristics, such as school culture, convenience or logistical concerns, and seat availability. Gabriella underscored this contingency when she pointed out, "There were not enough A or B schools, so they wanted us to be honest with them about their real options." In this statement, "real options" pertained to the more numerous C rated schools, which some Navigators said were more likely to grant admission given their great number of open seats. School decisions pose parents with tradeoffs, so gauging schools' cultures or the convenience of their location were sometimes additional lenses that helped parents and Navigators refine a search.

School culture was the second most frequently discussed attribute that parents were looking for, according to Navigators. Amna referred to school culture as "the story behind the grade," and asserted, "how students treat each other, how teachers treat students" may help parents understand the reason for school ratings. Most Navigators said or suggested that school culture was second to school performance level in most parents' eyes. Andre articulated this point when he claimed, "When a school is not an A school parents pay more attention to the school culture." Of course, the term school culture is somewhat vague and may mean different things, such as relations between students and school personnel, expectations for students, or the way parents were treated. One Navigator described it as a sense of "safety" parents get from the school. Notably, she indicated that this version of culture was the "most foundational thing" for parents; she explained,

> In conversations with parents, they don't usually ask about the rigor of classroom lessons or what the teachers' credentials are or what is the exact curriculum. They really just care about the essential need for safety and not just safety for their child, but for them as the parents, like who's going to be my contact person there? Who can I trust? Will they have my back if my child goes there? It's also that sense of connection.

These types of knowledge about social interactions can be very difficult to assess and obtain, though they constitute highly important attributes for some families. Most Navigators, however, said parents were primarily focused on seemingly objective measures of school effectiveness.

In helping parents parse various school attributes, Navigators leveraged multiple sources of information about schools. Their use of both district data and "soft measures" (Schneider & Gottlieb, 2021, p. 455) was somewhat novel for stakeholders both in and outside the local education scene as it started with deep experience, centered district data, and capitalized on insight from institutional and personal networks. Together, these lenses or ways of knowing shaped Navigators' sense of judgement and constituted valuable social capital by linking parents to allies with uncommon professional and personal experience in New Orleans' education sector. We can consider Navigator judgement in different ways: the way Navigators collect and curate information, their strategic calculus in selecting a choice set or counseling parents on priority lists, how they discern relationships between parent interests, student needs, and schools, or their general opinions. Not all Navigators possess the same manner of judgement, especially because levels of personal and professional experience and values vary; however, as agents to parents, their perspectives are valuable. For example, this dense web of experience and knowledge might make Navigators good at detecting misleading information, falsehoods, or "glossified" depictions of schools (Jabbar, 2015b). Additionally, in a changing educational landscape, parents

may have benefitted by partnering with agents who are working in a network of allies who were constantly evaluating schools. However, these advantages would be contingent on the numerous factors like the counselor's experience, depth of communication with parents, and willingness of Navigators to look beyond the school ratings that seemed such a concern to parents and members of EN.

Judgement underlies Navigators' comments about being honest about the opinions that parents sought from them. According to numerous participants, parents wanted honesty, or what they thought of as Navigators' subjective opinions of certain schools, as a complement to or replacement of the objective district data sources. An administrator and Navigator, Matt, explained,

> Expressing an opinion came with tradeoffs. We could be wrong or biased, but it's who we decided to be. If you've seen 50 schools up close walking the halls, and you're an educator, I want to know what you really think.

From this statement, we can infer that EN realized that deliberately providing subjective assessments was in the organization's and parents' interests. Andre stated, "our power lies," in being "able to give our opinions" and "be unfiltered" in evaluations of schools. A form of judgement, this honesty reflected Navigators' views on schools, as when Ja'Niya asserted, "I was very opinionated in my relationships with parents. My parents really did trust my opinion and, I would say, qualitative data." She offered an example: "Well, I know people who go here and this happens, so this may not be the best school." That is, trust could be built as Navigators recommended which schools not to attend. Honesty also applied to parents' actions or inactions as partners in school searches. Amna contended, "I'm 100% honest with the families where there are small changes you can make to get the kids where they need to be." Others, like Andre,

expressed a similar sentiment when he exclaimed, “I mean this is a child's future at stake, so we have to be almost radically honest about what needs to be done.” He conceptualized honesty as “giving families some grace but also tough love too.” This form of “honesty” is less about subjective assessments of schools and appears to indicate Navigators’ efforts to hold parents responsible for missteps or actions they thought parents should take. Notably, sharing a critical opinion with parents could be risky in maintaining relationships, but the risks appeared to be worthwhile in some cases and occasional costs in terms of conflicts were reportedly overcome. For Navigators, interpreting numerous sources of information and sharing their perspectives honestly with parents was a key, sought-after asset. Still, conveying a personal opinion or judgement in ways that appeal to, rather than alienate, listeners requires additional human qualities around communication and personal understanding.

Theme 3: Understanding

Navigators sought to provide understanding in terms of human sensitivity and care, communicating in ways that resonated with parents and ensured comprehension of intended meanings, according to participants. These very human processes underlie many of the forms of information support and assistance Navigators provided (see Table 4). A key approach to ensuring that parents understand school characteristics and choice processes was to personalize information to parents’ needs and interests. Additionally, when Navigators share cultural, linguistic, and other identity factors with families, as they often do, it is easier to convey information than when backgrounds differ. Trust appears to be another underlying component in developing shared understanding, and these members and former members of the NGO were explicit about working to build trust with parents. Overall, and in contrast to market theory,

which suggests lone information consumers driven by their values and optimization, forms of care, customization of knowledge, and reinforcing understanding helped parents become more efficacious participants in school decision processes.

As Navigators provided assistance and understanding, some developed ongoing companionship with the families they served. Four Navigators shared their view that they continued to be "friends" with parents they worked with several years after working together and that parents occasionally sent them updates about their children. For some Navigators, building close ties was at the forefront of their work with families. Daphney shared this statement in an employee profile: "With a parent in the military, we relied on our communities, especially when we had a parent deployed. So that drew me to EN: the chance to establish meaningful relationships with families and help them". Some parents appreciated these forms of care, like Victoria, who indicated that her Navigator understood and cared for her. She reported, "[Noreen] looked at me as a person and not as a customer" and noted, "She really looked into my child." Victoria felt, "We both connected in certain ways." It is important to note that Victoria was generally effusive in her praise of EN and it may be unlikely that other parents shared such a positive disposition. Whereas school searches can be impersonal, primarily leaving parents to their own devices, they might suggest that families are just part of a large machine or system. The occasional closeness of these ongoing relationships adds value to these relationships that likely improves Navigators' capacity to counsel them on school selection.

Being an understanding collaborator helped some Navigators respond to parents' challenges and assets. The way in which Navigators approached parents for decision assistance "really depended on the family," according to Amna. Similarly, Isabella explained,

> Eventually when we started to build relationships, we discovered that the work could not be limited to just how to tell a parent how to navigate a school or a system because humans are complex. In order for a parent to start thinking about the luxury of being present and understanding how to transfer over skills to support their child in school and at home, we first have to address the needs of those families and students.

Isabella went on to explain that she worked with families who faced homelessness, job loss, and forced relocation, and that some parents wanted to discuss how to cope with those circumstances. Rhetorically, she wondered, "How do I move forward?" These conversations, which might have been meaningful to parents, required Navigators to take stock and veer away from explicit school issues. Isabella stressed how the organization has learned to manage these demands, in part, by referring parents with broader needs to partner organizations. Ava remarked, "you have to pause and be able to encompass or take in everything that's going on and be able to support them across areas so they can have the mental capacity to be able to focus on education." On a separate note, there are aspects of timing and tone that require human understanding as when Navigators attempt to have conversations about personal accountability with parents. Noreen observed, "We walk a fine line between building a trusting relationship and honesty." In this case, "honesty" might mean conflict. If Navigators push too hard or do so under the wrong circumstances, they can alienate parents. More broadly, these relationships involve a lot of nuance, which indicates the need for Navigators to use a careful approach. At the same time, some Navigators might have been like a lifeline to parents, leading them to feel reluctant to demand more given their reliance on these partners for their children's educational needs.

To a great extent, Navigators fostered shared understanding by "speaking the same language" (Jacob) or having common geographic and linguistic heritage with parents. A veteran

manager and Navigator proclaimed, “You have to create an informal relationship, so parents know that you speak the language. We share the same culture, the same background to a certain extent — I use that as leverage to get things done for the kid.” This remark seems to suggest several points, including the value of commonality for effective communication. Educators tend to be familiar with the importance of code switching, for students and themselves, as a way to signal cultural familiarity and “Help them understand it in their language.” Yet, Andre’s phrase (“use that as leverage to get things done”) may also suggest that educational guidance sometimes took precedence over feelings of closeness, or that understanding in terms of care was merely a practical necessity that facilitated Navigators’ effectiveness in creating contact or pursuing goals. Whether a strategic affectation or sincere effort to promote connection, the preponderance of verbal communication in these partnerships required a great deal of fluency and sensitivity.

Information exchange tends to involve “a lot of talking” that was historically face-to-face meetings but has become increasingly remote through Zoom and phone conversations. One participant said that word-of-mouth communication provided “transparency” (Isabella) while another suggested verbal communication was “easier than reading and having to do this on your own” (Noreen). Victoria, a parent who worked with EN, agreed:

> They had an app, the EdNavigator app. I might’ve used it once, I hated that app. I would get in touch with her by phone call, text message, or email. I like it personal. I don’t like to go over an app if I don’t have to. It’s just easier to talk to somebody on the phone or to send a text.

Another Navigator observed, “Word of mouth lends credibility in New Orleans” (Amna). In a survey-based study of school selection and parents’ information use in Denver, Yettick et al. (2016) similarly found that most parents preferred to speak with someone for assistance. To

participants, word-of-mouth communication appealed to parents and provided helpful shortcuts over forms of technology and social media, though this impression is probably influenced by their workplace model which consistently led to in-person verbal communication.

Shared backgrounds between parents and Navigators also helped forge or maintain trust. Ja'Niya stated, "Being from the city, there's only a few degrees of separation between us, so that helps build trust." She reported that her experiences allowed her to create ties with a number families and explained, "I was part of it all – teaching before Katrina – so I have experience working in schools and just watching the changes. And I have a lot of friends in education. My mom is a teacher of 50 years." As insiders, some Navigators, like Andre, said they are "able to weave our stories with theirs [parents']" as a means to build trust. In general, trust plays a central role in Navigators' ability to engage parents. For some, that trust is formed by "creating a sense of comfort" with parents while for others it is nurtured by "having tough conversations" and holding parents accountable to high expectations for children that parents and Navigators discuss when they begin working together. A few Navigators indicated that "hourly employees trust us faster" (Amna), which the speaker explained was related to shared upbringing and school experiences between her and many parents. Joseph, a Navigator based in Boston, indicated that particularly middle class and affluent parents with whom he worked needed to be won over to establish trust. He recalled, "I found that the majority of the families that I work with, you had to demonstrate something that worked." According to Joseph, this sort of proof upfront was especially important for those with higher incomes and more highly educated parents. About these parents, he went on to say, "the relationship was secondary. It was knowledge then and there. But then, what kept them engaged with us was often the kind of partnership we developed with families." It is tough to tell from this statement whether the relationships were anything

more than transactions. Another participant claimed, “because it came from their workplace… their jobs certainly wouldn't put them on board with a bootleg organization” (Ja’Niya), which suggested that parents’ viewed EN as credible because it was provided as an employee benefit.

As they adapted to the new nationwide model, EN’s recruitment approach appeared to broaden at times beyond local educators and those who may be cultural insiders. One Navigator with whom I spoke, Gia, explained that she resided in Tampa, FL while working for the organization. She explained how it was “difficult” to advise parents in Boston, New Orleans and other regions of Louisiana that EN served. While she was the only Navigator with whom I spoke that was not based in their area of service, she noted “some of us weren't in Boston and Louisiana.” Advisors working outside of the region where they were serving parents were limited in terms of the specificity of information they might provide. In these cases, she said, remote Navigators “give them [parents] general information as far as requirements for registration, deadline information, different phone numbers or different organizations in that city that they could contact and use.” This arrangement undermines several core principles of EN related to being an insider, possessing localized knowledge, and tailoring assistance to parents’ needs.

Another aspect of human understanding relies on personalization. While studies of information support examine customized modes of delivery (Valant & Weixler, 2022), sets of schools (Corcoran et al., 2018), and search engines (Cohodes, 2022), Navigators personalize support in these ways too (i.e., timing and provision, by interest and recommendations, and search capabilities). Navigators tailored support along other dimensions as well, like families’ skill and experience selecting schools. Gabriella argued,

> No two cases were treated the same. Everything was individualized to the student, to the family. It wasn't a copy and paste kind of thing ever, and because of that, you know it makes it challenging to do the work as a Navigator. It's not like you create a lesson plan and you [as a teacher] do that same lesson for all families or kids. It was individualized.

Navigators explained how they attempted to diversify and customize information, contact, and forms of support (some of which are listed above in Table 3). These different ways Navigators adapted processes and input were a salient asset of these partnerships considering the stress of school decisions for some parents (Lareau et al., 2021; Potterton, 2020; Roda & Wells, 2013) and the ways school choice presents disproportionate challenges for underserved parents (Andre-Bechely, 2013; Brown, 2021; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016). Personalization, for those who had access to the service, is also a unique asset given the rational, market assumption about families theoretically optimizing school decisions.

For some parents, Navigator assistance addresses personal needs, levels of knowledge and capabilities. They accommodate parents by "breaking down" (Gabriella) statistics and technical information; "translating Edu-speak" (Andre) and jargon; and simplifying information. Some Navigators drew comparisons between the help they provide and what families can access at the two NOPS Family Resource Centers (FRC). Noreen characterized FRC materials as a "library of information" with "technical language" and "academic language," and noted, "Some of that stuff is written on a 12th grade level." Ava asserted that district information in general was not parent friendly; she described it as, "very fine print or explained in a very macro way that is not digestible for parents to understand." By contrast, some Navigators aimed to "make sure they [parents] fully understand the information" (Andre). He expounded further, "It's not just about providing [information], it's about making sure they understand the ramifications of their

decisions."[62] Helping parents understand regardless of their skill and knowledge level may be especially important for parents who are new to the school district. Isabella shared how she served migrant families from different countries with different school systems. In her opinion, coming in as an outsider "could be a shock to the system" because the district, she stated, "is a very complex system to navigate on your own, even if you grew up here."

A major approach to personalization involved tailoring a list of options or choice set to parents' school preferences. This form of tailoring allows parents to bypass volumes of unwanted data and focus on particular schools. A parent with whom I spoke found, "a personal recommendation on the right school" to be "so important." Carlson et al. (2023) contend that school selection, like other complex decisions, entails processes of editing, or compiling a list of options, and then selecting. Navigators appeared highly involved in both "editing" and "selecting," though additional evidence is needed to be sure. Curating a list and advising on rank or options could be complex, as it meant gauging the likelihood of admission at certain schools based on seat availability or relative demand, helping to fit suggestions to parent priorities, and evaluating school quality for numerous schools. Several informants highlighted the difficulty of dealing with a small pool of high performing schools. For instance, one Navigator said, "the biggest challenge was just not having a school that was perfect" (Joseph) while another described the challenge of "trying to pick the best out of the worst" (Amna). Reflected in her statement is the reality that assistance is no silver bullet especially in contexts with supply problems. Because

[62] He provided the following anecdote to illustrate how he might help parents "understand the ramifications of their decisions:" Some parents are hell bent on getting their child into a school and they only want to rank eight schools we're going to say, Okay, if you want to want to list A-schools go for it. But here's what you can expect if things don't work out your child when they don't have a seat, it means you have to go into round two, which means your chance to get into some of those the next tier schools goes down because those seats would have been filled in round one.

Navigators and parents were confronted with few high-rated schools and long waiting lists, Navigators suggested investigating schools with lower district ratings. Andre asked,

> How can we tailor the search a bit? How can we look at the qualities of a school you want in, yes, an A or B school, but how can we take… and apply those same qualities to maybe a C school, you might have looked at before?

Compiling a list of schools that was aspirational and practical likely involved some negotiation. These conversations about tradeoffs between the attributes of a desirable school are much easier in theory than in reality as they involve sacrifice and parents' reconsideration of their plans or hopes for their children. Working between parent preferences and school availability was its own form of customization.

Evidence suggests that Navigators also personalized the types of information that might appeal to individual parents. Victoria expressed appreciation for the interpersonal information involving other parents' stories that Noreen would explain. Noreen connected Victoria's situation with others when, for instance, she stated, "I know this family, they were able to get the child in there, and they're super happy and this happened. It makes it really personal in terms of knowing the experience of other families had who had gotten in." Victoria appreciated this less impersonal approach perhaps for the way it showed Noreen's familiarity with her goals and similar experiences among families. Overall, Navigators seemed to view "the level of personalization" as "a huge benefit for parents" (Gabriella). Joseph mentioned that the "individualized support" surprised families because, he noted, "a lot of places claim to do that." EN's approach to information and support involved a thorough – rather than cheap – form of tailoring that seeks to address parents' abilities, motivation, and interests. According to Navigators, their approach bridged information shortcuts targeted to parents' needs with a

personal touch aimed at building a trusting relationship. By doing so it met families where they were, but also aimed to lift their skills and abilities.

While personalization and getting on the same page with parents entails a sort of receptive understanding, several Navigators also applied a kind of assertive understanding, meaning that members of the organization suggested parents would benefit from coaching, mentoring, or teaching and tried to help them become self-reliant in future school selection processes. Perhaps because most Navigators are former schoolteachers, counselors, or administrators, "an educational component" (Gia) to these partnerships may be inevitable. Although, EN's website and promotional materials do not explicitly articulate a teaching mission, several Navigators took responsibility for trying to train or teach parents skills they believed would make them more autonomous. Navigators alluded to these educational purposes when they discussed trying to demystify the district website. Ava explained, "We would always start with the district information because I think that parents needed to at least be educated on how to find information to begin with and how to be able to look at what the data say." Similarly, Amna claimed, "while we're reading through these documents, I'm pointing out, 'this measures this, and you see this score means this.' So, in the future, when you get this again, you have the notes to be able to interpret it yourself." Additionally, Isabella identified herself as a "coach" and said, "you start thinking of your families as individuals who you want to equip with the right tools and questions," and noted this was particularly the case "the longer you work with the family." Noreen observed, "we knew that we wouldn't always be around" and, moreover, "We didn't want to be there the entire time. We wanted to see you grow as a family…. We named that up front." Others said they hoped to empower parents. Ava stated, "If I can educate a parent on this process or how to go about X, Y, and Z with one child, hopefully some of that

knowledge can be transferred to the next child." "Parent voice is my number one thing," she continued. "Ultimately, I think that I want them to feel in control." She relayed an example of one former parent advisee who went on to join a parent teacher advisory committee, which meant to her that "they really felt like they understood." Expressed concern for parent voice here may seem ironic given the way these statements suggest parents needed to learn and listen. Notably absent are any references to parents' resources or stores of knowledge or the way parents helped Navigators better understand their role. For Ava, parents might "feel in control" only after learning specific skills related to school searching and operationalizing their choice through the district enrollment and lottery system. If questioned further, members of EN might have said how "lessons" synthesized skills and parents' strengths, but on their face these statements indicate perceptions that parents lacked skills or knowledge for school selection. Overall, despite the "cradle to college" (Jacob) model of EN, which indicated that assistance would continue, many of these Navigators hoped to teach parents to manage these processes more independently.

It is important to nuance findings about the value of Navigators' perspective with human understanding by pointing out how Navigators reported instances of their information and assistance being unsuccessful. Joseph said that routine phone conversations with members of his caseload could be ineffectual. He shared, "Some would ask me questions, and some would 'Yes me to death.'" This point might convey how some parents felt obligated to participate or felt that more authentic participation was not worthwhile. At another point in the interview, Joseph expressed that some parents appeared more invested than others. He recalled, "usually, the ones that were engaged and met with us and did things we wanted them to do were the ones that were really happy with us." Clearly, there is a degree of circular logic with his statement as Joseph

might be basing his view of parent's satisfaction merely upon their willingness to participate. Also, those parents who are happy are probably the one who are more eager to participate. Across Joseph's comments, his expression shows a pattern of being slightly more critical with parents, the organization, and its leaders than most other Navigators. However, his criticism raises a point about the challenges of working together with parents even in an accommodating one-on-one relationship. Andre also noted "it can be challenging at times to get families to understand the urgency of a matter." He framed this difficulty as, "they're just dealing with life" and asked, "When they are facing other matters themselves, who am I to say that this issue outranks the issue that you're dealing with at home?" For some of the same reasons that parents seek out EN support, some families also appear to struggle with their side of the partnership. Andre wisely, but somewhat cryptically, asserted, "giving them space to deal with life, while also trying to maintain a sense of urgency around the child is a delicate balance." He noted that this orientation – that of prioritizing educational matters but respecting parents' other priorities by being deferential – was a dilemma that educators routinely face. The point appeared to underscore how teachers and members of the NGO had limited influence in assisting families particularly when families faced pressing matters like housing or food insecurity and health crises. Despite the potential value of collaborative approaches or assistance, there are legitimate reasons why families may falter in a consumer system even when help is available.

Opportunities to Systematize or Scale-up These Interventions

Because EN aspires to expand its services nationwide, conversations examined whether EN or NGOs doing similar work could (or should) scale up and whether schools or districts might fulfill the purposes EN currently does. "Scaling up" refers to both expanding EN's

operations and the role or number NGOs like it play in school selection so that these counselors become widely available to parents. Participants took three main positions on the question of whether EN could grow substantially or whether other entities could provide school selection assistance: a) that these functions ought to be done "in-house," which is to say in schools or by district personnel; b) that an NGO was essential for this role as an "honest broker" who was independent from the school system; and c) that an NGO should perform this role but due to perceived problems with EN, "another organization like it could grow to scale," which meant expanding its capacity to serve more families and additional areas. Understandably, each perspective was framed in terms of practical limitations of financial and institutional resources that would be required to extend these personalized approaches.

When asked about scaling up EN information supports, most participants were quick to assert that school districts should incorporate these services. Two Navigators expressed the notion that "We shouldn't exist in ten years, unless our model changes" (Noreen), a point that acknowledged a gap which public institutions might subsequently fill. In some ways, this affirmation about moving the service into district structures may seem obvious, as if supports had not caught up with shortcomings in the school system. Through their online presence, EN leaders argued that school reforms in New Orleans had "left many families behind" and changes needed to be "balanced with investments" in supporting school families (The74million.org). Per this argument, perhaps the city would eventually take responsibility where philanthropies were presently stepping to fund navigation services. As one Navigator, Noreen, said, "There's always a need for an outlier to start, I do believe in 3rd way values." To her, Navigators were pioneering a useful new approach in this market that was worth imitating. She compared EN with early charter schools, arguing that both confronted "stagnation, resistance to change, and red tape;"

then she concluded, “This model needs to be bridging best practices with schools.” Despite what may seem like an obvious appeal to adapting EN services to school systems, other Navigators objected and asserted that this approach was impractical as members of EN helped parents in ways that schools could not.

Still, other participants pointed out some benefits of incorporating information supports in school structures. One line of reasoning emphasized unique opportunities and greater efficiency if schools were to assume these roles. A former Navigator and supervisor (Noreen) explained that since each school has its own systems and ways of communicating, parents are required to learn and participate in different educational systems. The implication is that this approach is inefficient as it impedes swift understanding and that the two could be unified and use the same language and procedures. Others agreed that EN “could and should work within the school” as families already have “connections in schools to a teacher or a counselor or social worker” (Isabella). In addition to already having points of contact, one Navigator shared, “This should be done closer to students” as there are “So many more families who needed us.” “Closer to students” meant operating in schools rather than through a workplace model. Isabella’s “so many more” statement implies that school or district-based assistance might reach greater numbers of families than EN’s model. Other members of the organization thought public navigation support might compensate for perceived harm to relationships and, as Noreen put it, “build trust between the district and the schools and families.” Of course, this beneficial outcome would probably only follow if school selection assistance became a priority and was done effectively and routinely. Referring to EN’s work supporting families in closing schools, she stated, “You already have a ding against you because you’re closing their school and now you have to bring in an outside organization to do the work.” This point about outsourcing help to

families after closing their school seems especially convincing. Moreover, she thought districts would benefit from acquiring EN's longitudinal data on academic outcomes after receiving navigation services.

Other informants believed schools might provide a similar but less substantive version of the information support EN offered. A Navigator named Ava suggested that independent school personnel, similar to those at Family Resource Centers, could commit to regularly meeting with parents. Ava explained, "there's a lot of dollars and a lot of services that are being offered" and that these counselors would likely exist "If we put families first." Certainly, schools face a number of priorities in serving families and grapple with a range of resource challenges, so "putting families first" may also look very different than her depiction. She described having "a few per district" that would have 15-30-minute conversations as part of a total amount of time for every family each year. This depiction reflects Chubb and Moe's (1990) proposal in their article "Choice as a Panacea," in which families would be "required" to meet with "parent liaisons" (p. 10) who would help them evaluate schools and provide "advice and assistance" with completing school applications. However, Ava qualified her plan and explained, "I'm not sure if they would be able to provide it at scale just because we had anywhere from 100 families and we were at their workplace." Obviously, far more personnel would be needed to serve an urban school district. "It might look a little different how they offer the service," she acknowledged, but "even if the district was able to collaborate with families in some way… it would make it more accessible in the point of entry." These statements, that advising "might look a little different" and that the service could be "more accessible" ring true as EN committed substantial time and effort to relatively few school families.

A subset of participants criticized schools for being practically incapable of providing navigation services. One Navigator in The74million.org stated, “So much of what EdNavigator is doing is what you’d expect public schools to do. But we’re just not there.” This assertion suggests schools are not up to the task of supporting parents in this way. Joseph, a Navigator in Boston, pointed out, “Budget aside, schools should be doing what we do. Unfortunately, they are under resourced and understaffed. They try to do too much with too little.” It seems unlikely that schools would acquire the needed finances and employees for these roles. Other participants echoed that “having a Navigator is really resource heavy” (Amna) and, as such, schools had limited potential to offer information assistance. Gabriella reasoned that, “It’s about capacity and resources. I don’t know how that could be replicated in the school.” Another perspective that Gabriella shared suggests that decentralization in New Orleans made for an unfavorable context. She observed, “I guess OPSB [Orleans Parish School Board] can enforce this sort of thing, but I think OPSB, honestly, they don't want to meddle in what these charters are doing unless the school starts to fail.” Given the autonomy of charter schools and limited role of the district, a mandate to advise students on school decisions seemed far off.

Perceived deficits of public schools and districts, combined with attractive features of NGO support, made a case for EN’s novelty and value with school selection. A longtime Navigator emphasized that EN can provide rare, honest evaluations of schools. He reported,

> The district can only give ‘this is an A school, a C school, a B school; it’s located in Gentilly, the school leader is…’ very kind of stale stuff you can look up online. They're not allowed to be subjective; we are. That’s where our power lies, at least some of it.

Contrary to public officials who may need to be evenhanded about public institutions, EN could act as an honest broker as an outsider. Asked where else their power lies, he went on to describe

the leverage EN has in the community as a platform for parent support and advocacy. He and other members of the organization claimed that EN played an advocacy role that represented the interests of parents in conversations with school and district leaders. He commented,

> We're able to say, 'Hey KIPP, we have X amount of families at your school and their experience is… They're experiencing this issue. So, what are you as a CMO going to do to address it?' There's always power in numbers and there's power in parent voice. As much as we can, we try to amplify their voices in a way that almost takes us out of it and puts their issues at the forefront, and we just simply become messengers of their stories that they don't feel comfortable telling themselves.

This is a potentially influential role that is worth learning more about from viewpoint of CMOs and district leaders. Another advisor and manager noted that without EN, "Parents would lose a confidant to raise issues and concerns trustingly and without fear of retaliation." The comment reflects concern that some parents perceived potential risks in being too honest with their children's teachers or school officials. At the same time, Navigators may siphon attention away from parent-school personnel relations if they instinctively turn to their third-party agent for help. With EN, parents might find a fresh start as well as an "ally and advocate" (Andre) to help them and their child. As Joseph explained, "It depends on the parent, but they tended to not trust the school, like trust had already broken down, and that's why they were here… They're looking outside for help and they're looking for someone they can trust." The separation between the school system and the NGO was essential because some families needed an alternative or counterweight to school personnel who they were unlikely to seek for personal assistance. Matters of racial, ethnic, and cultural similarity are at least in the background of these conversations about trust and seeking a confidant. Many Navigators were Black and Hispanic,

like the majority of school parents in New Orleans, in contrast to roughly half of teachers in New Orleans charters, who are White and were not originally from New Orleans (Lincove et al., 2018). This commonality likely makes it easier for parents to build rapport with their Navigator. Some evidence points to Navigators' acknowledgement that they could nurture trusting relationships because they shared aspects of families' identities.

Every Navigator indicated that EN played a positive role for families, certainly in theory and, to varying extents, in practice. However, some organization members expressed concerns that the NGO played too narrow a role in supporting families. What was missing for one Navigator was what the organization was repeatedly asked but ill-equipped to do. That is, according to Isabella, numerous families experienced housing or food instability and required basic social services in addition to educational support. She was certain that EN was doing valuable work but suggested they might benefit as part of a collective approach, or "one slice of what a family needs among other organizations aligned to the same mission and vision." She asserted, "I don't know if you can do that in isolation" because, for instance, "You have to be a counselor to those who lost a child and support others; it takes a toll." Another senior Navigator discussed similar qualms about the limited scope of EN support compared to some families' needs and drew inspiration from the Harlem Children's Zone, a community-based network of health, educational, and social services. These perspectives recognize the benefits of this service to parents and the promise of a more coordinated approach among NGOs.

A vocal minority of three former Navigators expressed concerns about the functioning of EN and suggested that "Another organization like it could grow to scale" (Joseph) while three Navigators shared some skepticism about the direction of the organization since its August 2022 restructuring. Joseph detailed why he thought EN "struggled to scale," as he described high case

load numbers, poor leadership choices, and what he perceived as employee mistreatment. As a former employee, he recalled,

> They ended up treating some of their employees pretty poorly, and I would say they really ostracize people. They did everything you're not supposed to do in terms of change management; I had seven supervisors in four years. They just kept looking elsewhere for the answer.

Turnover and rapid organizational change are typical of some new nonprofit organizations (Slatten et al., 2021), and several Navigators complained about what they saw as a lack of consistency. Though his point is not reflective of the majority of Navigators, it suggests disconcerting alienation among some employees and inconsistency in the service, which aligned with comments from at least two other participants. One participant observed, "They've almost been operating as a startup since 2017. I was in a rebuild, and after I left, they were actually in the process of doing another rebuild" (Gia). Employee instability seems to be reflected in frequent website changes to employee profiles and the three different addresses for EN's home offices reported online (and on their website), none of which was correct.[63]

One potentially valuable critique several Navigators expressed concerned the credibility of managers as educators with very little teaching experience. Prior to starting EN in 2015, executives were lead administrators in the New Orleans branch of TNTP, an organization founded by Michelle Rhee that is dedicated to hiring and training teachers particularly in urban districts. One Navigator, Gia, was concerned that the leaders were not "actual educators" and thus "didn't really have the knowledge that goes into really working in academic settings." She claimed that there "should have been a little bit more research and data collected behind what are

[63] Of the 14 current employees, seven are described as Navigators while others are described as having administrative or communications roles.

the needs of the parents." Another former Navigator conveyed a similar concern. She described managers as "serial nonprofit administrators" who were successful fundraisers but struggled to interpret employees or parents' needs. Her comment indicates concerns about their fitness for leadership and legitimacy. For example, she described them as "detached" for mandating the use of a cell phone app for all communications that she claimed was unpopular with parents.[64] Part of the problem, in her estimation, was that "every person who worked as a Navigator was Black and the three people who ran it were White," which, she noted, "became an issue to me and others who worked there." Underlying this observation about racial differences between leaders and Navigators was a set questions about the leaders' intentions, ability to connect with families served, and credibility with most members of the NGO.

Reactions to the restructuring in August 2022 seemed to indicate some discontent, as several long-time Navigators left the organization after EN announced that parents would move between Navigators specializing in different content areas and the organization would shift in scope from regional to nationwide.[65] Navigators did not say explicitly that they were leaving for these reasons, but the timing seemed to suggest it. Sentiments about these changes at EN varied. Some Navigators stated that the organization "does a good job of remaining nimble" (Andre), or "has become more strategic about how to ensure there are clear outcomes for our work and it doesn't feel so overwhelming" (Isabella). Other Navigators questioned the "sustainability" (Noreen) of virtual meetings, which became the main form of contact due to pandemic restrictions and remained after lockdowns had lifted. Gia explained, "Many parents struggle with online communication. They didn't have access to Zoom... and phone conversations made it kind

[64] Relatedly, a parent with whom I spoke said she "hated the app."
[65] It reoriented the NGO from a regional entity to nationwide service, recast Navigators as specific issue specialists rather than generalists, and incorporated a pediatric health component.

of difficult." Another Navigator who advised families in both regions indicated concern that EN was targeting clientele from universities around Boston, like MIT, rather than "marketing to our target demographics" (Gia). In the midst of an organizational reorientation to a nationwide approach, some members of the organization preferred to keep a citywide focus. A former Navigator exclaimed, "The only way to make New Orleans better is if the people that know how to make it better stay. I want my focus to be families here" (Amna). This individual explained that she could not feel responsible for fixing problems in other places when her community needed attention. If this change is the reason several longtime members of the organization left, then this strategic shift was very costly for the NGO.

Documentary sources suggest some additional questions about the operations of EN and its capacity to continually sustain itself. The NGO has raised significant amounts of money in its initial years, totaling $5,836,335 in assets by 2020, mostly from fundraising (Instrumentl.com). EN ostensibly relies on a benefit-based model to generate revenue, but corporate clients in the form of hotels and universities contribute only a small amount of its budget. The Fordham Institute emphasized that EN has "an innovative business model that provides learning advice to families as a workplace benefit" (Pillow, 2023). An article in Edweek states, "The cost of the program to parents is usually covered by their employers with the hope that it will result in better work focus and retention." Both explanations are consistent with participants' comments during interviews, as well as descriptive statements on their website, though they conflict with information in publicly available IRS filings. Between 2015-2020 EN generated 92% of its revenue from financial contributions and only 7.2% from program services (Propublica.org). EN's website acknowledges, "We use a shared cost model with generous funding from our philanthropic partners to maximize our impact and minimize costs for you and your employees."

It may not be unusual to rely on philanthropic support to get established in initial years (Anderson, 2018); still, EN's outsized reliance on philanthropic support, where the highest proportion of revenue from services was 17.2% in 2020, coupled with numerous misleading public statements about how business partners financially support the organization, should provoke some concern about future stability and revenue prospects. Apart from prospects for future revenue, this dissonance between rhetoric and reality should raise questions about whether the organization and several media entities have misrepresented this part of the NGO and why. The narrative of "a business doing well while doing good" (Robinson, 2017) is compelling, particularly for those who may want to believe that a market-driven system creates innovations to address shortcomings. So far though, in supporting EN, philanthropies are funding a market-oriented notion, not an independent program. Reasons for this overstatement about the EN's finances and functionality may be political. Debray and coresearchers (2014) describe the way clusters of intermediary organizations in, or involved in, New Orleans have packaged and promoted research about incentivist policies (e.g., charter and voucher programs) to create echo chambers that propagate messages without strong evidentiary backing. Their research maps interest group coalitions that finically support and advocate for the expansion of market reforms. Funders, like the Walton Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation, who support EN, are among the philanthropies that Scott & Jabbar (2013) report as sponsoring and disseminating research about the effectiveness of these incentivist reforms to the media and policymakers. From this vantage point, overstated messages about EN's business partnerships repeated in The74 and other media outlets may be part of the same activism in which certain philanthropies have engaged in New Orleans for more than a decade.

There are additional questions about organizational costs. While public records were not available for subsequent years, pandemic disruptions were probably costly for EN considering that their service works primarily through face-to-face interactions. It may have become more difficult to recruit donors to provide funding for an in-person, workplace model that could not function due to pandemic restrictions. For instance, income from philanthropic contributions dropped from $ 4.6 million in 2019 to almost one third of that amount the next year, or 1.7 million in 2020 (Propublica.org). Furthermore, IRS records convey surprising rates of executive pay for a small nonprofit. When averaged across the first six years (2015-2010), executive pay equaled the combined wages and salaries of all other employees.[66] In 2020, EN's three executives were paid $239,256, $236,898, and $198,275. Such decisions about compensation (in an organization that grew to 15 employees in 2022) prompts questions about how managers prioritize organizational expenses.

Table 6

IRS Form 990 Filing (EN) Showing Yearly Revenue, Revenue Sources, and Salary Information

Year	Revenue	Revenue Source - Contributions	Revenue Source - Program Services	Executive Compensation	Other Salaries & Wages
2020	2,179,857	1,789,911 (82.1%)	373,907 (17.2%)	698,682	983,662
2019	4,924,282	4,598,701 (93.4%)	276,924 (5.6%)	800,536	999,585
2018	1,198,714	969,656 (80.9%)	190,209 (15.9%)	690,318	853,373
2017	2,972,398	2,850,000 (95.9%)	107,754 (3.6%)	671,915	620,180
2016	3,774,383	3,750,000 (99.4%)	22,585 (0.6%)	661,358	211,421
2015	1,350,005	1,350,005 (100%)	0	201,424	39,479
6 yr average	2,733,273	(92%)	(7.2%)	620,706	617,950

[66] Perhaps the executives may have actually been the Navigators in the initial years; it is difficult to tell based on the data that is available to me.

Notes: Amounts are in dollars. Where relevant, percentages appear in parentheses. Source: https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/473909778

EN may have had to become dependent upon financial contributions because their services are cost intensive in terms of time, skill, and salaries while their clientele are predominantly low-income families who probably could not pay for the services if they entailed a fee, which Jacob noted might be required in the future. Aside from temporary arrangements with OPSB to serve families in closing schools, the organization has not had been able to secure public sources of funding. Stepping back, it is questionable whether private funding of any kind is ever likely to provide significant services to financially poor or working-class children, or whether this kind of service requires public provision in order to be effective. Some recent developments suggest that states or districts might allocate money for Navigator services to support parents. These funding possibilities could materialize in a number of ways: through a new categorical grant, modifications to funding streams that are already present, and changes to educational savings accounts, where they exist, to permit parents to pay for navigation services (Pillow, 2023). A Florida legislative bill, HB1, would offer a source of funding families could use to employ Navigators, which the Fordham Institute asserts, "would make history by codifying a new role in our state's educational ecosystem." The proposal seeks to reform Florida's school choice scholarship programs and create education savings accounts that parents could then use for private schools, tutoring programs, extracurricular and enrichment activities, and camps. Navigator services could find a foundation of public financial backing in HB1 and similar legislation. However, such legislation would represent a significant advance in privatizing public education.

Overall, information support from this NGO underscores the value of not having a one-size-fits all approach to assisting parents with school decisions. Attentive to the time constraints

of their primarily working-class parents, Navigators draw on multiple sources of knowledge, to advise families. According to Navigators, parents seek and benefit from forms of human understanding, care, and personalization. Ultimately, EN works to facilitate student access to high quality schools. Whether this organization is able to scale or transplant "best practices" to public schools or districts depends on a mix of questions tied to funding and leadership priorities. However, evidence of Navigator-parent relationships underscore how complex decisions about schools may require considerable time and nuanced negotiation.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Separating students' residences from their educational entitlements may create additional schooling opportunities for underserved students, but it also poses potential burdens on families forced to navigate choices (André-Bechely, 2013; Brown, 2021; Pattillo, Delale-O'Connor & Butts, 2014; Heyward et al, 2020; Potterton, 2020). In many urban districts with charter schools and choice policies, a new class of semi-private organizations has emerged to support families, but the efficacy of these organizations remains poorly understood. Navigator services provide individual support to families by interpreting school information, managing school selection processes, and collaborating on aspects of educational advocacy, compensating for families' varied circumstances with sensitivity and insider knowledge. To better understand this new set of new actors and the information and assistance they offer, this qualitative case study drew on interviews with Navigators, documents and online publications, and informal conversations to explore one NGO's perception of parental needs and its organizational approach to collaborating with families.

Summary and Overview

Evidence from this study indicates that EN believes parents need time and flexibility, professional judgement, and personal understanding in selecting their school of choice. At their most effective, Navigators provide these types of information support by establishing rapport and learning what kind of schools parents want. While each case varies, Navigators have accommodated parents' schedules by, for instance, communicating at parents' workplaces or over modes of communications parents may find convenient. They have also augmented parents' time and effort by narrowing information in accordance with parents' school preferences. As

former local educators, counselors, and administrators who share the racial, ethnic, cultural, and geographic backgrounds with families they serve, they are able to translate school information for families and draw upon extensive social capital. Navigators routinely parse and discuss district data together, couple these data with firsthand experiences visiting schools, and keep up with "the grapevine" by talking with area educators and parents. Although their accumulation of knowledge is "not scientific," it likely provides EN with insider qualifications while preserving their outsider independence, with which they can willingly give their opinions and stray from "unbiased" assessments of schools that district officials may be tied to. Furthermore, Navigators apply interpersonal knowledge and skills in their attempts to build trust, exhibit care, personalize information, and develop independence in the parents they serve. These forms of understanding also entail the sensitivity to find "a delicate balance" between "urgency around the child's needs" and "space to deal with life" or non-education-related priorities.

In this chapter, I discuss the benefits of Navigator services in terms of the evidence presented in each of the three major themes. In doing so, I highlight the way this study extends earlier work on information asymmetries and interventions by elaborating on the advantages of Navigator information and assistance. This chapter then discusses some shortcomings of the NGO Navigator approach in terms of tensions with their insider-outsider status, systemic problems that threaten their stability, and challenges related to scaling up. After, I explain some of the limitations to the study, notably an absence of legitimate parental voice. The chapter closes with brief commentary about implications for future study.

Discussion of Findings

While this study is descriptive and has limitations, in conjunction with prior studies of information assistance by Navigators and middle school counselors it illustrates the both the promise and limitations of NGO school choice counseling.[67] An earlier study stated, "Early lessons from Navigator organizations suggest that policymakers, funders, and nonprofits should nurture supports that improve access to quality educational experiences, especially for those families who face the greatest barriers" (Heyward, 2020, p. 5), a tentative endorsement of differentiated supports. Building on their limited descriptive analysis, this study further explains how NGO navigators offer time intensive, personalized support targeting the needs of primarily underserved families. The analysis reveals various attributes of school selection assistance that Navigators articulate and say they provide to families. In interviews, participants spoke confidently about the way their flexible support and types of information influenced and helped parents. Yet, it was difficult for Navigators to demonstrate those differences in terms of parent satisfaction with a chosen school, approval with various dimensions of the assistance, or later progress on student achievement. To know if Navigators were successful, we would need to identify these three factors, and determine whether EN provides parents the information they want about desirable schools on the terms that families need. Parents would be the appropriate source to ask if Navigators built trusting relationships, provided them helpful shortcuts, offered

[67] Some parties who support privatizing public education by funding individual students suggest that Navigators could play a much larger role in "unbundled" approaches to education. In these systems, proponents contend that allocating education funding directly to families might allow them to better meet their own differentiated needs and could also favor overall efficiency. Under these plans, low-income students and those with special needs might receive larger portions of funding, which they could use for ancillary services, tutoring, or other forms of academic or emotional support (Pillow & Hill, 2019). Navigators, as educational experts, would help families determine students' needs and guide them in spending their funds on fitting educational programs; with a percentage of the per-student funding would pay Navigators for these counseling services. These arguments about Navigator roles in an "unbundled" education experience are untested, unaccountable in some ways, and may mislead officials who might otherwise support Navigator services in versions that are less hostile to public school systems.

useful knowledge that was firsthand and tailored to preferences, connected them to other helpful individuals, and taught them to navigate school searches in ways that could benefit them later. With these data, the NGO could make a strong case about how they are offsetting information asymmetries. Even still, it is evident that Navigators are helping to solve some problems related to parents' school decisions on a case by case basis.

Despite its caveats, this qualitative study deepens our conceptual understanding of NGO navigation, information, and support for parental school choice. By understanding the experiences of Navigators themselves, this study helps clarify how effective Navigators evaluate schools differently than parents or school and district personnel – namely through a lens that combines professional and personal experience, school visits, organizational network ties, and cultural similarities with the families they serve. This array of sources is one that parents are not typically exposed to and though district officials may have similar sources of knowledge, they are bound by a supposed evenhandedness that encourages them to withhold judgement and compare schools only along formal measures. As an "ally and advocate" Navigators share their judgment about schools, personalize information, and provide one-to-one assistance that offsets parents' time constraints.

The organization represents a source of bridging social capital for families as Navigators share a unique insider-outsider perspective. With the evidence from this study, families' satisfaction with EN services is unclear, although the benefits to these families of these links in terms of social capital is quite clear. For the primarily working-class families EN serves, Navigators offer connections that confer advantages. By design, the types of individuals who become Navigators (i.e., teachers and counselors with knowledge of local schools) and the information networks to which they are exposed make them assets to families making school

decisions. With these exceptional relationships, parents gain a "bridge" to local agents with insider knowledge of schools and the "rules of the game" for navigating that system. Ordinarily, families' social networks may not expose them to skillful educators with the "gamesmanship" to help them rank schools depending on factors like open seats at institutions, the "feel" of the school, logistical constraints on parents, and particular views of a good school. Different networks offer information about schools that ranges in quality, making the knowledge more or less operational in influencing desirable school decisions (Fong, 2019; Kafka, 2022). The bonds that many parents hold are unlikely to carry the advantages and information specific to school finding that Navigators offer. Reportedly, the NGO seeks to teach parents how to advocate for themselves by questioning school personnel; to work the system by keeping a school visit schedule and applying a mix of improving and high-profile schools; and to move beyond initial impressions of schools by interpreting lengthy and sometimes complex district data together. While the impact (or content) of this "educational component" is not possible to assess without communicating with parents directly, the "lessons" are an example of the way parent-Navigator ties likely offer unique benefits and redistribute access to certain forms of capital.

The outsider status of Navigators likewise grants advantages to these holders of bridging social capital. Andre reported that Navigators get to be an "honest broker" who, through their autonomy from the school system, offer their opinions. On the opposite end of the conversation, parents gain a "confidant" with whom they can share concerns about their child or their child's school that they may not feel comfortable expressing to teachers. As noted, EN's outsider status endangers the future of this assistance as nonprofit finances can be precarious. Nevertheless, collaboration with Navigators connects parents with knowledgeable outsiders who may represent or serve their interests and not those of the school.

While Jochim (2019) and other studies offer limited description of these "parent advocates," this study helps us understand Navigators' experience and expertise that inform their judgement. In particular, this analysis highlights the variety of ways EN learns about and judges the desirability of schools, and in turn generates new knowledge mostly for private consumption. They rely on a composite of different informational sources including school visits (with and without EN evaluation rubrics), district data, the comments of peers, and earlier professional or personal experiences. From these data, it is difficult to know how different sources influence their perceptions of schools – and while the judgements of individuals will vary – there is value in Navigators' ability to draw on this wide knowledge base. Members of EN bridge particular experiences in schools with big picture assessments they obtain through the organization, the district, and their networks. Collectively, Navigators are building a new knowledge base ostensibly for parent assistance. The evidence is not necessarily systematic or formalized but EN promotes it as a unique insider perspective. A connector in school finding and advocacy that links families and schools, EN is a small hub in the "new political economy of knowledge production and use in educational coalitions" (Debray et al., 2014, p. 179) that joins philanthropic support, ideologically conservative education reform and its advocates like the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and market-stye policy changes in New Orleans. Although the NGO set out to remediate problems of school choice, its message about better information for school selection ultimately makes it part and exponent of these reforms.

Still, Navigators combine valuable stores of knowledge to advise parents. Schneider & Gottlieb (2021) argue that while state and federal policymakers tend to "see" schools in terms of formal measures, it is important to account for educators' and families' experiences, judgements and perceptions: what they call "ordinary measures." They observe that "hard" or formal

measures tend to distort and reduce our complicated social reality in ways that betray the accuracy and richness of phenomena we attempt to measure.[68] As such, ordinary personal judgement of those who are part of these social processes is essential to create realistic and accurate assessments. In particular, gauging school culture calls for a subjective assessment. Navigators report that parents seek psychologically safe spaces for students and personnel they feel comfortable approaching with concerns, which are idiosyncratic qualities that probably depend on personal experiences in schools or awareness of the school environment. They recommend complementary lenses composed of soft and hard measures for policymakers designing accountability structures for schools. EN routinely evaluates schools and uses these results to advise its parents. Navigators' multiple-perspectives approach draws on a range of data, including school inspections by trained educators, that families are unlikely to gain access to by other means, particularly from the school district.

Consistent with prior literature on school choice and some marginalized groups of parents, like Black or Latinx women, these data also reinforce the time-related demands of school selection, such as the fact that some parents can't easily access certain information given limits on school search capacity and time. Evidence from this study indicates that a number of the primarily working-class Black and Latinx parents, which EN serves, encounter time constraints as a decisive barrier. Members of EN appear attuned to the time constraints of these working families in their original workplace meetings, flexible modes of communication, and videoconferencing. Two Navigators discussed participating in school tours on parents' behalf. Generally, studies indicate that navigating school choice is generally "mother work" for Black, Latinx, and low-income families and entails labor intensive tasks, like school visits that tend to

[68] Daniel Koretz makes a similar case about Campbell's Law and the manner in which standardized exams obscure what educators are attempting to evaluate thoroughly in his 2007 book, *Measuring Up*.

be more challenging for some underserved parents than their counterparts (Andre-Bechely, 2013; Ben Porath, 2021; Brown, 2021; Cooper, 2007; Haley-Lock & Posey-Maddox, 2016; Patillo, 2015). There are good reasons why parents are supposed to be responsible for these school decisions, but the time and effort required to be "an active and strategic chooser" (Ball, 1993, p. 13) can punish families who have busy and inflexible schedules. Parents must maneuver through unfamiliar school systems and enrollment routines, while ostensibly neutral policies can in fact disadvantage, stigmatize, or alienate some parents (Angus, 2015; Ben Porath & Johanek, 2019; Clarke, 2012; Coldron, et al., 2010; Perez, 2011), particularly when families are new to the district or country; lack transportation; speak languages that the district does not have the capacity to serve; or have demanding work schedules or health problems. For all parents, "choice of school is embedded in a complex pattern of family demands and structural limitations" (Ball et al., 1995, p. 57). Thus, the flexibility that participants described is a key advantage of this NGO's informational support.

To accommodate parents' schedules, school preferences, and other needs, EN personalizes information and support. Assistance ranged between exploring options and visiting schools together to narrower forms of help like interpreting "Edu-speak" and getting technical assistance on the OneApp. According to Navigators, the style of assistance depends on parents' needs. Overall, Navigators sought to demystify the school decision process by assisting with and training parents on some of the "rules of the game" (Lareau et al., 2016). Assistance could be particularly useful in the dialogue that parents and Navigators have about their goals and preferences, as this time and deliberation might lead to a richer understanding of what they are seeking. Particular problems could also be entry points for assistance.[69] According to Victoria,

[69] As Amna stated, "The families that gravitate towards us are usually the families who have been having and experiencing the most difficulties."

missing information about school requirements was one reason to seek support. This motive is not surprising as Haxton & Neild (2012) found in their study of the Philadelphia choice process that parents often lacked discrete verifiable facts about admission they needed. Other studies indicate that family members and students misunderstand salient aspects of New York City's choice process (Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018; Sattin-Bajaj & Jennings, 2020). In some cases where school personnel try to prevent students they view as harder to educate from enrolling, an "ally and an advocate," as one Navigator described them, could be a difference maker. In some instances, assistance from an insider may increase a parent's sense of agency in the process, help them persist, or even increase their independence in these experiences, as several Navigators noted withdrawing support over time from those they believed no longer needed help. Moving forward, it would be valuable to generate more specific knowledge about key forms of assistance as Navigators took a differentiated and broad approach and because studies indicate that personalized support can facilitate parent choices for high-performing schools (Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018; Bossetti, 2004; Jochim et al., 2019).

Whereas Jochim et al. (2019) describe Navigators' work with parents and observe some interpersonal qualities (e.g., "patience and persistence"), this study offers a more thorough view of the qualities that help make these partnerships effective. Relationships between Navigators and parents selecting schools reproduced person-to-person communication that often involved stories or anecdotes and worked through trusted network ties. Scholars have characterized school decisions as social experiences where choices sometimes depend on "the talk on the playground" (Bader, Lareau & Evans, 2019) and input from friends, family members, and other peers (Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1995; Bossetti, 2004; Holme, 2002; Nield, 2005; Goldring & Phillips, 2008). Studies of school choice indicate that parents seek and privilege information from those they

view as high status (Fong, 2019; Pattillo et al., 2014). According to Fong (2019), some social connections contribute particularly useful information, namely those who parents view as holding authority on matters of education or affinity with their own parenting style. Navigators have the potential to act as this type of informant who, like actual peers, shares informal information by word of mouth. While using the same relational techniques that often shape school decisions, Navigators can claim professional status, perhaps suggesting to parents that they are the most suitable counsel for "a complex social process, the results of which may not be evident for many years" (Kafka, 2022, p. 116) like education. In a district where, "the system had changed so quickly," as Andre said, this type of information may be even more current than that shared by neighbors or friends.

Effective Navigators personalized information and assistance. Several recent studies have examined the effects of personalized information on parents' preferences, schedules, and other needs. Studies of information supports, too, have moved in this direction. Valant & Weixler (2022) used text messages, email, and standard mail to prompt parent choices; Weixler et al. (2020) used text message reminders, emails, and "friendly" messages; Arteaga et al. (2021) embedded warnings in school choice websites if sets of options were not likely to result in placements; and Cohodes et al. (2022) outfitted school counselors with a digital search tool and an App to create lists of suggested schools for students. These more recent experiments followed an earlier era of simpler information support studies that mainly reduced information and guided parents toward schools with higher performance measures in terms of standardized test scores (Hastings & Weinstein, 2008; Glazerman et al., 2018), high schools with above average graduation rates (Corcoran et al., 2018), and GreatSchools.org ratings (Valant, 2014). What looks like a trend toward more customization in these information studies may reflect

researchers' awareness of the importance of engaging individuals with materials in ways that matter to them. Investigating these nuances and tailoring support to individuals is costly in terms of time and finances, and most of these experiments are preoccupied with minimizing costs at the expense of full customization (e.g., Valant & Weixler, 2022).

Data from this study appears to reinforce how one-on-one support looks different depending on families' needs and how Navigators are privy to useful information that is difficult to systematize, like teacher-student or teacher-parent interactions, school culture, reputation, or personal observations. Evidence here underscores the value of social dynamics such as using language that is local and culturally relevant, providing care and companionship, sharing situated knowledge about the "feel" of a school, standing in for a parent at a school event, responding to a problem or distress with help, or using instinct to determine what a parent needs at the time. All of these contextual ways of knowing underscore Cohodes et al.'s (2022) remark that "Information is just one part of a multi-dimensional problem" (p. 10).

Would district or school officials be willing to provide these various and more humanistic insights about schools? Presently, school and district personnel have considerable control over the dissemination of knowledge reflecting what happens in various buildings. NGOs may be free of some potential conflicts of interest that schools face in being open and transparent about information. School administrators may keep some knowledge private if it reflects poorly on them, their colleagues, or their organization as stories of school cheating scandals in Atlanta, New Orleans, and other districts show. Some Navigators perceived that schools were not fair arbiters of information. Several participants expressed discomfort at schools' presentation of growth scores despite having very low proficiency scores. Amna portrayed school officials as reticent. She exclaimed, "It's all I've ever asked of the schools, 'Why are you coveting this

information?'" There are various reasons why getting complex local knowledge about schools can be difficult. In the above cases, a Navigator from an NGO may also be unable to bring concealed information to light. Yet, with EN parents would be exposed to firsthand experiences, filtered through expertise and coupled with other sources of information from a plausibly disinterested party.

Navigators held mixed views about systematizing these forms of information support into school districts and scaling up NGO assistance for school selection. Most participants thought schools could incorporate choice supports in light of their perceived value of these services to parents and potential benefits of building relationships between parents and the school district. Others believed that financial limitations might constrain schools or districts in performing these roles or that some parents really needed an external actor to be an "honest broker," especially where parent-school relationships were strained. According to some studies, institutional mistrust is likely to constrain the development of honest and trustworthy relationships between school officials and social groups that schools have subjected to racism and mistreatment (Lareau, Weininger, & Warner, 2021). Notably, one Navigator argued that the district is not interested in helping to guide families. He stated that the NOPS officials were "checking the box" by referring families in closing schools to EN and that there was "not enough district curiosity" in whether parents participated in EN's services. This observation accords with other studies, which indicate that families typically receive little support in the choice process from school and district staff (Perez 2011; Sattin-Bajaj et al. 2018).

A subset of Navigators who believed in EN's mission had doubts about EN's leadership decisions, financial stability, and alignment between organizational priorities and parents' needs. Concerns around financial stability reflect a shortcoming of the insider-outsider status of NGOs

as they may by unlikely to secure steady and reliable financial backing. Plus, these kinds of support are expensive. As a separate issue, 1:1 interventions may be subject do different levels of quality depending on the engagement and rapport between the parent and the advisor. Another issue that parents and advisors across NGOs face, both now and in the future, involves dealing with a scarcity of desirable schools. Specific to EN, their worker benefit model excluded employees who did not qualify for the benefit and others who could not work. In the case of Victoria, workers could also be dropped from the service if their employee no longer subscribed to EN's service. [thus, many people are cut out from this/these services]

Another tension in the study concerned dissonance between certain schools parents wanted for their children and other schools that Navigators said would improve their chances at gaining admission. Navigators reported that many parents wanted their children to attend "A" rated schools that were high performing on the city's evaluation system, but in instances when parents could not rely on the letter grades, parents sought other sources of information about academic quality. Like many districts, New Orleans Public Schools simplifies school performance into a handful of quality thresholds, in this case with recognizable A-F school letter grades. The benefit of this heuristic is that it is a condensed guide and invites comparison between schools. Unfortunately, as Amna pointed out, "Parents become hyper concerned about a letter grade. But they don't have a clue what goes into it." Not only is the opacity of these letter grades a concern for her, the grades become even more problematic when there are so few A and B schools to select from. As some Navigators explain, listing many of these A and B-rated schools, does not tend to get parents a match as they tend to have limited seat availability, but instead may push them into the second round of the enrollment lottery. Thus, Navigators explained how they invited parents to consider and list C-rated schools, which were far more

numerous, and in doing so, to consider other elements of "fit" or desirability aside from test score-based indicators of success. In some ways, this sort of "settling" (i.e., choosing more C schools and fewer A or B schools than parents originally intended) is disconcerting because Navigators are using their influence and expertise to guide families into schools they may not want, at least at first. More so, this strategy appears to be expedient and better than nothing given that there are only 11 A-rated schools and 26 B-rated schools (of 110) in New Orleans in 2022-2023 and that students' who do not get matched to a preferred school in the first round move to the second round, when seat availability is further diminished. (NOLA Public Schools: Find," 2023). Notably, though, many Navigators argued that some C-rated schools are higher quality than their district rating indicates.

Limitations of the Study

Although many studies investigate how parents approach school decisions (Bader et al., 2019; Pattillo, 2015; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2015; Waitoller, 2020), ambiguities persist, especially as to how local context influences school selection (Fong, 2019; Rowe & Lubienski, 2016; Sartain & Barrow, 2020; Corcoran & Jennings, 2019; Potterton, 2020). While this study intended to shed light on Navigators' and parents' perceptions of collaborative choice processes, I struggled to recruit parents during the data collection process, and thus developed a sample that provides evidence almost entirely from Navigators' perspectives (with the exception of one parent). Given the absence of meaningful data on parents' experiences, the final study cannot speak to parents' school decisions or the research question, "How do parents respond to the information and support that EdNavigator provide?", which is an important element of the lived experience of school choice (Ellison & Aloe, 2019; Pattillo et al. 2014). Notably, a lack of data

from parents also means that I am unable to corroborate the themes and hypotheses in this study concerning process, timing, and attributes of Navigators' information support from parents' perspectives, or determine whether parents felt the organization served their interests well.

There are other limitations related to the study's unit of analysis. In the midst of the study, this NGO embarked on a significant restructuring plan that narrows their purpose and changes the Navigators' roles (EdNavigator.org). In the midst of this transition, several long-time employees left. Most of the informants with whom I spoke were more knowledgeable about the original model. The service continues to change. Rather than having a go-to advisor as they had since 2015, the NGO began referring parents to specialized Navigators in special education assistance, K-12 academic support, and college planning, depending on present needs. Participants reported that services remained mostly online since the pandemic began and a blog announcement stated that the organization embarked on a "nationwide approach" while still being "just as committed to the places [New Orleans and Boston] we came from" ("Meet the New EdNavigator," 2022). A May 1, 2023 article on the organization's website states,

> Over the coming months, we'll be winding down our partnerships with hotels, universities, and other employers in order to scale up our pediatric partnerships. This summer, we'll be launching new partnerships with two top-ranked pediatric care providers: Children's National Hospital in Washington, D.C., and UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital in Oakland, CA. Navigators will begin working with families from both hospital systems beginning in August. We're looking forward to meeting our new families and getting right to work with them. (https://www.EdNavigator.org/blog)

Notably, this new strategy seems to indicate that the organization may be abandoning its "worker benefit" model, may no longer be serving families in New Orleans, and may be moving away

from educational policy in general. These drastic changes – and the general instability reflected in the number of times EN reportedly restructured between 2015-2023 – represent shortcomings in the non-profit model. [it may be independent, but it is unstable] Additionally, in terms of data collection for this study, the timing of these changes makes EN an imperfect and atypical unit of analysis – even before one considers their unique worker benefit model or Navigators' concern that they are "not targeting their target population."

Finally, there were limitations to the methods of inquiry. While organization leaders originally offered opportunities to observe advisory sessions virtually, which would have provided an opportunity to witness parent-Navigator interactions, leadership changes made those meetings difficult to schedule. Key employees transitioned out and their replacements were less interested in granting me access to the organization's decision-making process. As I lost the opportunity to learn about the organization from the inside, I began recruiting a sample that included former employees and two Navigators who worked with families in the Boston. This sample may potentially represent a skewed set of perspectives and prevent me from gaining the most up-to-date insights on the service. In part, a small sample runs the risk of "key informant bias" (Pelto & Pelto, 1975, p. 7) as I cannot be sure if those who may be overrepresented in the data set (i.e., Andre with two interviews or Noreen who had a long interview and referred a parent) were typical of the organization.

Implications for Future Research

Additional research is needed to deepen our understanding of the role NGOs play in school selection and their potential to address information-related inequities in school access. As a continuation of this study, I aim to recruit additional parents and stakeholders around the

organization to further develop and corroborate or challenge these findings.[70] Other studies school selection assistance should also seek to capture parent voice through interviews, focus, groups, or surveys in order to hear how the prime stakeholders evaluate these services. Comparative case studies, in particular, could illuminate the relationship between parents and Navigators, as well as different NGOs' operational approaches. In contrast to the atypical case in this study, it would be helpful to identify a critical case (Yin, 2013) of NGO school decision assistance and evaluate it to better understand a highly effective version of navigation or a financially stable organization. Similarly, multiple cases might be used to outline different providers of information support – schools, a district resource center, or private consultants – or support at different levels, like PK-12 and college entry counseling, and allow for explicit comparisons along specific dimensions. Further, this approach would enable analysis of embedded units of study, such as conditions under which these NGOs can build effective, long-term relationship with families or advisors who tend to enroll families in higher-performing schools.

Careful attention to comparisons may also help researchers better understand the impact of navigation services (e.g., on student performance, student or parent sense of belonging, or on externalities like parent's development of social capital or willingness to engage or volunteer in their child's school), which are questions that overshadow this and related studies. Prior studies (e.g., Jochim et al., 2019) argue that Navigator information and support could help offset underserved parents' capacity constraints related to school selection, but they cannot provide clear evidence of outcomes. Valant (2022) comes closest by examining the priorities, placement, and period of time parents spend in a matched school between a) those who had both EN support

[70] I will likely be able to use snowball sampling to recruit additional parents and participants. Time requirements related to the project deterred me from trying to obtain referrals where it appeared there was potential.

and closing school priority in the lottery, b) students who transferred out of the same school one-year prior (and did not have EN assistance or this priority), and c) students in other similarly rated schools (in the same year) who did not have EN support or the priority. Though it provides helpful insight, this study entangles two benefits in one variable and makes it difficult to appraise the value of each.[71] In the absence of side-by-side comparisons, we are left with little reliable data on the outcomes of navigation services. EN promotes some survey statistics to emphasize the efficacy of their service, such as, "93% of families say they are satisfied or highly satisfied, 4 out of 5 families say EN is the most trusted source of information and advice about educational issues, and 95% of parents say their Navigator always responds quickly when they need to talk." However, satisfaction and responsiveness are qualities we should reasonably expect given EN's expertise and individualized focus.[72] Sounder evaluations of the benefits of EN's information and assistance would help build a more persuasive case for the role of these advisors in supporting school selection.

In this study, Navigators perceived that EN has a definite impact on various outcomes. They described improved grades after a student got "a fresh start" (Ava), or saw reduced turnover at certain hotels, which Noreen commented was their "value add" to business partners, and some Navigators interpreted parent involvement in a committee as a reflection of increased confidence. There are other indications of parent satisfaction; Victoria, a parent, remarked that Noreen's help was like a "miracle" and an EN parent stated, "For 10 minutes of Gary's time, it's

[71] If the EN had useful measures to "prove" the academic value of their service for students, it may have been evident in speaking to administrators. I asked an executive "how do they know it words as intended?" and the individual responded by disparaging surveys they had used in early years and referring me to the Valant (2022) study. My intention at the proposal stage was to gauge parent satisfaction of Navigator support and their child's new school with a follow-up questionnaire, yet that approach, too, may have been limited by sample size and inexperience with survey design.

[72] I am not sure if these are completely internal surveys, which, if so, would make it difficult to validate for the clarity of questions, data sample, and survey procedures.

become a lifetime of knowledge for my kids" (Edweek.org). Assessing certain student outcomes of the service may also allow researchers to identify potential differences between groups, as recent intervention studies indicate that some marginalized groups of students, like English Language Learners, benefit more than others (Cohodes et al., 2022). Ultimately, moving toward clearer insights about what happens as a result of the service may require sound comparisons between students' own experiences at different times or between similar student groups.

This study also has implications for future research that maps the different dimensions of information for school selection. Researchers have studied various features of information related to parents' PK-12 school choices. Yet, this emerging body of knowledge could benefit from a systematic investigation that helps illustrate the state of this research. In this study, I conducted a limited scoping review. A more intensive systematic review should be conducted to modify or redesign these results. Additionally, a more systematic review should seek to investigate districts' information supports that have been tried but remain unpublished, as it might better illustrate what we can learn by synthesizing the findings from the existing literature. Doing so may help identify new determinants of school decisions and additional supports that resonate with families. As various forms of educational choice continue to proliferate (Irwin et al., 2021), clarifying the state of this literature may contribute valuably to ongoing research and policy considerations.

Evidence in this study points to ways that the district and an NGO like EN might work together. NOPS's contract with EN during several stages of school closings shows a template for collaboration where the district officials referred parents to EN who were required to find a new school. Might the district also consider publicizing some of the qualitative assessments of schools that EN compiles, or attempt to construct their own? Considering parents' reported

interest in aspects of school culture and emotional safety, district and state leaders might determine and incorporate more complex social concepts that parents may view as useful knowledge, which could factor into school ratings. While schools and districts tend to struggle in capturing or approximating these sources of knowledge, broad-based surveys and observation protocols offer some potential means (Schneider, 2017). Schneider (2017) presents a framework for comprehensively illustrating school quality data that, in turn, moves beyond test scores and draws on various community stakeholders to observe and evaluate schools.

As New Orleans Public Schools continue to pioneer mixed public-private district oversight through its decentralized portfolio management model, district initiatives aimed at supporting school choice on the demand side may need to catch up to advances on the supply side. Harris (2020) observes that in New Orleans market reforms advanced swiftly while regulations that ensured transportation or offered a unified information and enrollment system or protected the rights of students with special needs gradually followed behind. To design more equitable choice systems, it is crucial to repeatedly ask, as some scholars have:

> Can we design school choice systems to begin with the premise that education is a mixed public/ private good - that it should address parents' interest in seeing their own children succeed and, at the same time, meet the needs of the community to have all students educated to a high standard? (Levin, 2009 in Ben-Porath, 2021)

While school districts might borrow from Navigators' approach to information and assistance and may even try to require parents to meet with school or district counselors, as Chubb and Moe suggest (1990), these services appear to be better situated in autonomous nonprofit organizations given the sources of information EN can draw on, its willingness to provide subjective advice, and its commitment to a slower form of individualized support. However, the abundant tensions

around insider-outsider status as they relate to funding and our limited knowledge of how well these NGOs perform from parents' perspectives leave questions about navigator services as a structural solution to information disparities and problems of PK-12 school selection.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

If public education is a competitive field of play, as some scholars assert (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), the initial stage of gaining school access is key and can be highly consequential. Significant educational opportunities are determined at the outset, or school enrollment. In many urban districts that have school choice policies, parents nominally assume the role of decision makers and take responsibility for the process and results of school selection. We know that school access in choice contexts is fraught with inequities, among them information asymmetries and resource inequalities that prevent families from being able to explore school options. Such "information gaps" (Teske, Fitzpatrick & Kaplan, 2006, p. 969) among parents are not random, but correspond to the race and SES of parents (Andre-Bechely, 2013, Lareau, 2014), and are linked to inequitable access to schools (Corcoran et al., 2018; Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016; Sattin-Bajaj, 2015). For families to determine a desirable set of options, they need knowledge of relative school availability and limitations on access. Useful information allows parents to act on educational opportunities and, when they gain awareness of some barriers to school access, they may find workarounds or other options. Accordingly, these insights may grant a greater degree of agency to make deliberative decisions in light of real options and restrictions.[73]

Policymakers' efforts to address information imperfections, however, are not enough, as "choice"-related policy assumptions magnify other inequalities related to processes of obtaining and using school information. Extant research shows that these systems have fewer benefits for students who are historically marginalized by race/ethnicity and class, as compared to their

[73] Economists assert that when parents lack information, their options are diminished and the quality-enhancing effect of competition and the market mechanism are undermined (Lovenheim & Turner, 2018).

White and wealthier counterparts. While providing more information is, at times, an effective strategy for increasing democratic accountability (Clinton & Grissom, 2015; Pozen, 2018), government efforts to bombard families with more data about schools is unlikely, on its own, to impact the way parents navigate school selection. Researchers have long observed that "choice of school is embedded in a complex pattern of family demands and structural limitations" (Ball et al., 1995, p. 57), which impact parents' opportunities to make meaning and make use of the information already potentially available to them. Realistically marketplaces of schools conceal the way parent advantages like extra time, know how, disposition, and other resources convert into school access. Too often parents' relative capacities to navigate school selection are tied to the quality of their child's eventual placements (Cobb & Glass, 2009).

In this exploratory case study of a navigator organization, EN, I examine an understudied collaborative model for school decision making in which primarily underserved parents partner with educational advisors to enroll in desirable schools. This approach reframes school selection from an atomizing, rationalistic slate of procedures to a relational opportunity for flexible support that corresponds to personal goals and preferences, as well as school availability. NGO navigator services, of which EN is one version, reflect a new set of non-market actors who interpret and supplement district information – bypassing and foregrounding information subjectively as a matter of judgement. In doing so, Navigators draw on a unique combination of information sources both inside the education system, or "in the trenches"(Amna), and outside as independent evaluators. The support they provide parents, at times, interweaves assistance and information and ranges between touring specific schools and training parents in the "gamesmanship" of ranking schools on an application to improve chances of admission. Overall, the independence of these NGOs allows them to play a useful and valuable role that challenges

and complements school and district processes. Whereas this study helps reveal the potential for EN to accommodate parents' school decision needs, provide useful information, and connect families to schools of interest, families' approval of these services remains opaque without having access to parent voices, as do the results of these partnerships. Without their perspectives, we may wonder whether the understanding, time, closeness, and insight that counselors share with parents is aspirational or idealized.

Promising though these relationships appear to be, Navigators and the NGO can only serve a large share of families if the NGO thrives or remains stable. This study reveals cause for concern and numerous organizational tensions in EN's insider-outsider position. Consequently, this analysis suggests this service will likely remain niche and not scalable. As outsiders, Navigators benefit from independence as school evaluators and "confidants" to parents, but the NGO has been beholden to philanthropic funding and interrupted by "rebuilding" phases that aim to expand the organization's reach and financial security. Though many nonprofits traverse rocky starts, these participants reported considerable changes in the organizational model and high turnover during the first seven years that might have undermined the organization's growth plans. Notably, a recent reorientation of the service model indicates the discontinuation of services in New Orleans, which means that Navigators cannot offer "cradle to college" support to families it began relationships with. In this study, informants also questioned EN reliance on an app and virtual meetings for communication with parents. As the organization seeks to pivot to a nationwide model, it is worth asking whether and how they might draw on local, insider knowledge and form close relationships in the course of advising parents. In short, navigation for school decisions is cost and labor intensive, and these challenges raise questions about organizational sustainability and, ultimately, credible impact on educational inequities.

Still, districts and NGOs should seek to simulate the benefits of EN parent support by providing aspects of time and convenience, perspective, and understanding and personalization. Sources of public funding will likely be needed to reinforce the work of these NGOs in light of their mission to serve the education needs of lower-income families. In rare instances, NOPS has contracted with EN to support families displaced by school closures, but other funding innovations will need to be devised to make navigator services sustainable or scalable. According to participants, districts might also incorporate personalized assistance into schools or at the district level through independent advisors. These arrangements will require changes in personnel, their roles, and procedures to assure that underserved families receive support. At the same time, evidence from this study suggests that systematizing school decision assistance may sacrifice aspects of the NGO insider-outsider position.

Incentivist policies like charter schools, voucher programs, and intra-district choice nudge and entice families to secure educational opportunities. Where individuals are expected to advocate for themselves (in supposedly neutral systems), possession of social and cultural capital is determinative as these resources help shape exposure to information and assistance that opens doors to desirable educational opportunities. Forms of cultural capital (e.g., in the terms of skills, attitudes, and actions) provide implicit rewards with school placement (Lareau et al., 2021; Roda & Wells, 2013; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020). In this study, Navigators describe various ways they aid families in getting children into sought after A- and B-rated schools. For underserved families, learning these unspoken set of expectations, assumptions, and procedures becomes important advantageous. Some studies show that institutional actors, like Navigators,

intentionally use their social capital to empower marginalized students and families (Noguera, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Stepping back, access to quality public schools should not be contingent on possessing certain skills and dispositions. For this reason, policymakers should seek to improve educator and student support, expand public investment in education, and equitably distribute students and resources across schools. Still, in light of the embeddedness of neoliberal education reforms in New Orleans, officials here should seek to counteract the challenges and inequities related to school selection. A potentially viable way to support families with school decisions is to provide personalized information assistance as it may limit the potential harm of information asymmetries and demand-side problems like discriminatory admissions. Middle class and affluent families are already able to invest ample time in these decisions, call on social contacts, and employ choice consultants. With more resources, these families can buy the information or advantages that may get children into desirable schools. Not surprisingly, researchers document how privileged families' social, financial, and educational advantages get extended through school admissions in competitive choice contexts. Navigators act as a surrogate source of capital that may afford families useful assistance and information. Though broader systems of choice are unjust and require deep reform, decision makers and scholars should seek mid-level solutions like personalized choice assistance to improve problems of inequitable school access and information asymmetries.

Systems of educational choice continue to expand particularly in urban districts (Irwin et al., 2021). By increasingly delegating school enrollment decisions to parents, these policies have reframed matters of educational access and equity as private goods to be seized by individuals (Labaree, 1997). In this individualized and neoliberal context, most parents need certain forms of

knowledge and navigational support to benefit from these programs. Considering patterns of demand-side inequities related to PK-12 school choice, new structures or potential solutions to information asymmetries and inequitable access are needed. EN reflects a recent, third-way approach where community-based organizations provide parent collaboration for school decisions, apart from state support and market forces. Though not a "cure all" for choice inequities, community-based assistance and personalized information, which EN offers, could be a tool policymakers use to improve one key mechanism in ensuring equitable student access to urban schools.

Appendix A –Interview Protocol for Navigators

I. Members of Ed Navigator (current/ former)

Interview date and time:
Participant name:

Screening

a) Have you worked for Ed Navigator in New Orleans and, if so, in what capacity?

1. What do parents want to know and what do they want for their child(ren) educationally?

Listen for: Extend-day programs, composition of student body, a recommendation, reputation, safety, certain extracurricular activities, size, teacher quality, creativity, social-emotional wellbeing, neighborhood, classroom management, student test scores, test prep, college preparation, diversity or composition of study body or personnel, services like Special Ed or the availability of before- and after-school care, programs like G & T. In your opinion, what makes a school a good school? Listen for whether parents explain why these attributes are important.

Possible probes: Are parents concerned with the school's performance rating? Did location matter? How so? Did composition of student body matter? Were there concerns they had about schools that they wanted to avoid? Do you think they were able to find the school(s) that matched what they were looking for and has the qualities they value?

2. What do parents want from the organization?

Listen for: Are they looking for information about schools or enrollment processes, support with the time and number of tasks required to explore school options, assistance with matching child's strengths and learning challenges to available schools?

Probe: what kinds of support or assistance are parents looking for?

3. What kinds, sources, and formats of information do you share with parents?

Listen for: What sources of knowledge do the Navigators draw on to advise parents?
Do the kinds of information involve lists, graphics, brochures, testimonials, websites, in-person experiences like tours? Do the sources of information include your own experiences and opinions, other parents' or professionals' recommendations, district ratings or websites, school-made websites or handout, other 3rd parties' comments? Do you see yourself as supplementing information or presenting new knowledge?

Probe: how do you know the information you are providing is good information? How does the organization gauge school quality or desirability?

4. What do you view as Ed Navigator's overarching goal(s)?

Listen for: counseling or educating parents, getting students into preferred schools, addressing racial or class-based inequities in educational access? If you are trying to help parents adapt to the task and time demands of school choice, how do you coach or guide parents? Are you trying to teach parents the "rules of the game?"

Probe: Would you say that Ed Navigator has other, maybe even intangible, qualities or roles?
How does EN target and recruit families?
How important is it for EN to help reduce or filter information?
Does the organization have long-term goals related to school choice policies?

5. What are some of the qualities or attributes of the assistance that you and organization offer(ed)?

Probe: Is assistance intended to be responsive, empathic, compassionate, trustworthy, comfortable, and comprehendible? If so, how?

Listen for: How do you and the organization build trust with parents so that assistance is observed? To what extent is relationship building with families a goal? Do you keep in touch with families? Do you have personnel who speak different languages?

6. Is information or assistance well aligned to parents' preferences and child's needs? If so, how?

Listen for: Does EN have a set of stock information that they give to all parents and then follow that with information that may be more individualized? Do you feel that EN may try to steer parents away from their expressed purposes and priorities due to some pressure within or on EN? Do you think that the organization guides families toward or away from certain schools? To extent are Navigators free to exercise their own judgment versus following a script or standard approach to collaborating with parents?

Probe: How are you able to personalize the advice you give to families? Do these partnerships look mostly similar or different, and why? How do parents evaluate the usefulness of this information?

7. What does collaboration between EN and parents look like in terms of timing and modes of communication and respective roles?

Listen for: What is the frequency and consistency of contact and what are the modes of communication involved? How often does parental engagement involve face to face contact? When and how does communication employ different forms of technology?

8. Would you say that there are parts of the school selection process do parents tend to find challenging or difficult?

Listen for: finding out information about school quality or characteristics, learning about deadlines, enrollment requirements, how to get admission to schools with waitlists, finding time to meet with school personnel, attending events, prioritizing schools, transportation, comprehending the lottery, primary language spoken and language of info materials, completing the common application, understanding school or district materials, time off from job or unpaid responsibilities, finance issues? And listen for why?

Probe: are there parts of the process that parents tend to find easy?

9. How, if at all, does EN take into account geographic and social context when developing information for parents and when seeking to assist them?

Listen for: Is Ed Navigator is able to help parents overcome any other systemic constraints with school choice in addition to information asymmetries (e.g., like limited transportation, long school waitlists, confusion about the game).

10. Would you say that the district sources of information differ from those of Ed Navigator? If so, how?

Listen for: Do you think Ed Navigator has a unique capacity to offer what the district does not or maybe cannot? Is EN translating or interpreting sources of information that the district provides?

Probe: How would you describe the relationship between Ed Navigator and the district?

Listen for: does it complement, compete with, or otherwise interact with the district?

11. How likely do you think EN is to scale up and provide these services to many more families?

Listen for: Does the organization have a plan to grow to scale and, if so, what is it? Are there particular concerns you have about the organization's capacity to expand? Is EN working with similar organizations as it considers how to expand services? Do you know if leadership is trying to move the organization to take on a broader role here or in other places?

12. Are the kinds of information and assistance that EN provides something that school or district personnel might do? Why or why not?

Listen for: Are there particular qualities or aspects of Navigator assistance that are well suited to an NGO or nonprofit? How well positioned are school or district personnel to do the work of Navigators?

Probe: What attributes or benefits of information support that Navigators engage in might be lost or gained if school personnel were to perform these functions?

13. What challenges do(did) you encounter in working with parents, if any? (Listen for: To what extent do you see parents as reluctant to share or be responsive to assistance?

Listen for: Which parts of the school selection process does EN engage in, which parts do parents do, and which parts they do together? (Listen for: unified lottery, enrollment at schools, fairs, etc.)

14. Overall, do you feel that the organization serves parents well?

Listen for: How do you know if people are with you?

Probe: Do parents express satisfaction with the service or assistance process? How so?
How do you evaluate whether you are serving the parents' interests or not?
Do you track how they are doing in the schools?

15. Is there anything else that you would like to add about Ed Navigator or the way the organization seeks to inform and advise families who are selecting schools?

Demographic Questions

a) Can you please tell me your zip code? _____

b) Gender
   a. __ Male
   b. __ Female
   c. __ Prefer not to answer

c) How do you describe your race/ethnicity?
   a. __ African American/Black
   b. __ Asian
   c. __ Latinx/Hispanic
   d. __ Native American/Alaska Native
   e. __ White
   f. __ Multi-racial, please specify:_____

II. Parent Interviews

Interview date and time:
Participant name:

Screening

a) Do you have a child that is transitioning between New Orleans public or charter schools between this past school year (2021-2022) and Fall 2022? Or do you have a child that is entering a NOLA public or charter school?

b) Have you worked with Ed Navigator in New Orleans to select a school for your child and, if so, when? Who? For how long or how many times?

c) Is your child entering grade PK – 12?

Background Information

d) What is your child's first name?

e) What grade will your child be entering in the Fall 2022 school year?

f) What school will your child be attending in the Fall 2022 school year?

g) What school did your child attend this past school year (2021-2022)? (Probe: how long did your child attend this school?)

h) Do you live in one of the following neighborhoods: Mid-City, Gentilly, Hoffman Triangle, Aurora, Musician's Village, Delassize, Fischer, Lafayette, Lake Terrace, Livaudais, Pigeon Town, New Orleans East, Milneburg, St. Thomas, Tulane – Gravier, St Claude, Irish Bayou, Pontchartrain Park, Gert Town, Desire, Irish Channel, Freret, Michoud, Garden District, Florida Ave, Holly Grove, Iberville, Bayou St. John, Algiers, Seventh Ward, B. W. Cooper, Lakeview, Touro, Bywater, Marigny, Audobon, CBD, Filmore, Treme, Fairgrounds, Lower 9th Ward, Carollton, City Park, French Quarter?

i) Do you have other children living at home? If so, how old is each child and what school will each child be attending in the Fall 2022 school year?

1. What are you looking for in a school good for your child?

Listen for: Extend-day programs, composition of student body, a recommendation, reputation, safety, certain extracurricular activities, size, teacher quality, creativity, social-emotional wellbeing, neighborhood, classroom management, student test scores, test prep, college preparation, diversity or composition of study body or personnel, services like Special Ed or the availability of before- and after-school care, programs like G & T. In your opinion, what makes a school a good school? Listen for whether parents explain why these attributes are important.

Probes: Were you concerned with the school's performance rating? Did location matter to you? How so? Did composition of student body matter to you? Were there concerns you had about school that you wanted to avoid? Do you think you were able to find the school(s) that matched what you were looking for/ has the qualities you value?
2. What do you seek to gain from working with parent advocates and EN?

Listen for: Are you looking for information about schools or enrollment processes, support with the time and number of tasks required to explore school options, assistance with matching your child's strengths and learning challenges to available schools?

Probe: what kinds of support or assistance are you looking for?
3. Can you describe the process that you followed/follow to choose a school for your child next year? How is that process going?

Listen for when the process started? what district events, fairs, or school open houses did the parent attend? Was it a step-by-step process or did they adapt or combine different methods?
4. What kinds, sources, and formats of information does/did Ed Navigator share with you?

Listen for: What sources of knowledge do the Navigators draw on to advise parents?
Do the kinds of information involve lists, graphics, brochures, testimonials, websites, in-person experiences like tours? Do the sources of information reflect your own experiences and opinions, or professionals' recommendations, district ratings or websites, school-made websites or handouts, or other 3rd parties' comments?

Probe: Did you feel like information you were getting was good information, or did you know so? How do you think the organization gauges school quality or desirability?

5. Does NGO information and assistance make a difference in the way parents engage in school selection? If yes, how so? Is it helping to shape better school decisions? Why?

5b. What do you see as Ed Navigator's overarching goal(s)?

Listen for: counseling or educating parents, getting students into preferred schools, addressing racial or class-based inequities in educational access? Helping parents adapt to the task and time demands of school choice? Learning the "rules of the game?"

Probe: Would you say that Ed Navigator has other, maybe even intangible, qualities or roles? How did EN recruit you? How important is it for EN to help reduce or filter information?

6. Can you describe some of the qualities or attributes of the assistance that organization offers?

For instance: Is assistance intended to be responsive, empathic, compassionate, trustworthy, comfortable, and comprehendible? If so, how?

Listen for: How does the organization build trust? To what extent do you think relationship building with families is a goal?

7. Would you say that the information or assistance is aligned to your preferences and child's needs? If so, how?

Listen for: Does EN have a set of stock information that they give to all parents and then follow that with information that may be more individualized? Did you feel that EN tried to steer you away from your expressed purposes and priorities due to some pressure within or on EN?

8. What did your collaboration with EN look like in terms of timing and modes of communication?

Listen for: What was the frequency and consistency of contact and what were the modes of communication involved? How did engagement involve face to face contact? When and how did communication employ different forms of technology?

9. Are there parts of the school selection process that you found particularly challenging or difficult?

Listen for: finding out information about school quality or characteristics, learning about deadlines, enrollment requirements, how to get admission to schools with waitlists, finding time to meet with school personnel, attending events, prioritizing schools, transportation, comprehending the lottery, primary language spoken and language of info materials, completing the common application, understanding school or district materials, time off from job or unpaid responsibilities, finance issues? And listen for why?

Probe: are there parts of the process that you found to be easy?

10. Did EN take into account geographic and social context when sharing information with you?

Listen for: Was Ed Navigator is able to help you overcome any other constraints with school choice in addition to information asymmetries (e.g., like limited transportation, long school waitlists, confusion about the game)?

11. How does collaborating with EN compare with other, perhaps prior, experiences participating in this choice system
Listen for: Do you think Ed Navigator has a unique capacity to offer what the district does not or maybe cannot? Is EN translating or interpreting sources of information that the district provides?

Probe: Would you say that the district sources of information differ from those of Ed Navigator? If so, how?

12. Was anyone else beside you and members of Ed Navigator involved in the decision about your child's school?

Listen for: who, relationship to the parent or student, whether the person worked in school or other organization, how the person was involved, what information or help did the person contribute, was assistance focused on the child or the school, or both? Did they offer suggestions, advice, or just information? Was involvement a one-time thing or ongoing? Is a partner involved?

Probes: Did that person play a valuable role? How was that person involved in the school search or decision? How important would you say this person's role was? Would you say this individual had a big impact on your school choice? How so?

13. Do you feel that the organization serves parents well?

Listen for: Why do you think so?

Probe: How do you evaluate whether they are serving the parents' interests or not?

14. Are the kinds of information and assistance that EN provides something that school or district personnel might do? Why or why not?

Listen for: Are there particular qualities or aspects of Navigator assistance that are well suited to an NGO or nonprofit? How well positioned are school or district personnel to do the work of Navigators?

Probe: What attributes or benefits of information support that Navigators engage in might be lost or gained if school personnel were to perform these functions?

15. How do you feel about the New Orleans school that your child has been matched to?

Listen for: Do you see this as a good fit for the rest of your child's time in elementary school? Are there aspects of this school that you are impressed with? Are there aspects of this school that you have reservations about?

16. Is there anything else that you would like to add about your school decision or thoughts about the value of working together with Ed Navigator?

Demographic Questions

d) Can you please tell me your zip code? _____

e) Gender
   a. __ Male
   b. __ Female
   c. __ Prefer not to answer

f) How do you describe your race/ethnicity?
   a. __ African American/Black
   b. __ Asian
   c. __ Latinx/Hispanic
   d. __ Native American/Alaska Native
   e. __ White

f. __ Multi-racial, please specify:_____

g) How does your child describe his/her race/ethnicity?
   a. __ African American/Black
   b. __ Asian
   c. __ Latinx/Hispanic
   d. __ Native American/Alaska Native
   e. __ White
   f. __ Multi-racial, please specify:_____

h) What is the highest level of education that you have completed?
   a. __ Less than high school
   b. __ High school graduate
   c. __ Some college/vocational/technical
   d. __ Associate degree
   e. __ Bachelor's degree
   f. __ Post-graduate, please specify:_____

i) What is the highest level of education that your child's second parent has received?
   a. __ Less than high school
   b. __ High school graduate
   c. __ Some college/vocational/technical
   d. __ Associate's degree
   e. __ Bachelor's degree
   f. __ Post-graduate, please specify:_____

j) Besides housework, do you work? ___yes ___no

   a. If yes: What is your occupation? _____

k) What is your family's approximate income per year?

   a. ___$10,000 or less
   b. ___$10,001 to $20,000
   c. ___$20,001 to $35,000
   d. ___$35,001 to $50,000
   e. ___$50,001 to $75,000
   f. ___$75,001 to $100,000
   g. ___$100,001 to $150,000
   h. ___More than $150,000

l) 9. Where does [child's name] fall in the birth order? (e.g, is [child's name] the oldest? Second oldest?)

m) Who referred you to the study?

n) Would you please consider suggesting another person who may be willing to talk who has worked with Ed Nav?

Appendix B: Online Participant Consent

Google Form accessible at: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1qcJy3SAQDN38lbr3oYR14TwQdUzeo0IYeaw_Sh95Fqs/edit

Consent to Participate

Navigator Services and School Decision Partnerships

Purpose of the Study

This research is being conducted by Jason Saltmarsh, a doctoral candidate in Education Policy at the University of Maryland (UMD) and advised by Dr. Campbell F. Scribner. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because or your association with Ed Navigator and, in the case of parents, your connection to Ed Navigator and your participation in public school choice in New Orleans. The purpose of this research project is to better understand how Ed Navigator informs and assists parents in selecting public schools in New Orleans, LA. We hope that the findings from the study will help improve parental and family supports with school decisions in districts that offer school choice policies. This study has two parts: 1) an interview, which is intended to explore employees' and parents' perceptions of Ed Navigator's role in facilitating school enrollment decisions; and 2) a survey, which is intended to illuminate the degree to which you, as parents, are satisfied with your child's school placement and the factors that influenced your school decision.

Procedures

The procedures for this part of my study involves one interview that will last approximately 1/2 to one hour. The interview will be conducted via the Zoom online meeting platform and will be audio and video recorded with your consent. In the interview, I will ask you, as members of Ed Navigator, to discuss what Ed Navigator thinks parents need in terms of information and assistance with selecting their school of choice, and how do they support parents in obtaining what they think parents need. I will also be asking you, as parents who have worked with Ed Navigator, about your perceptions of choosing a public school and how, if at all, working with Ed Navigator has influenced your decision. To guide the discussion, I will ask you open-ended questions about your experiences (e.g., How do you view the usefulness of information that the organization provides, and the value of the service overall?). The questions I ask will be informed by preliminary research involving document review and related studies. Later, in November of this year, I will ask you parents who participated in the interview portion of this study to briefly share responses about your satisfaction with your child's new school by completing a short online survey.

Potential Risks and Discomforts

There are no known risks aside from a risk of breach of confidentiality. There is risk of a breach of confidentiality, particularly for members of Ed Navigator. Efforts to mitigate this risk are described in the Confidentiality section below. You will be able to skip any questions that they do not wish to answer

Potential Benefits

There are no direct benefits associated with participating in this study. However, participating in this study may help researchers, policymakers, and educational administrators understand how to more effectively support parents and caregivers in accessing high quality Pre-Kindergarten - Grade 12 public schools in the United States.

Confidentiality

Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by the assignment of code numbers and pseudonyms to protect your identity. All study-related materials will remain in password protected computers. For the purposes of data access, the data that is collected (audio recordings of the interviews, transcriptions of the interview, and all analysis of the data collection) and signed consent forms will be uploaded and saved to University of Maryland’s secure Box database where the researcher’s account is password protected. A key that links participant codes and pseudonyms to your names will be stored securely and separately from other study data in a password protected folder. These confidentiality measures extend to both the storage of data and any potential future publications including this data.

Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Names will not be used in any written reports or publications that result from this research. I will be the one researcher who has access to this data that I have collected from you. Audio and video recordings will be destroyed as soon as they are no longer necessary, which I anticipate being up to one year after the interview is conducted. After I am able to use audio recordings to correct written transcripts, I will destroy the recordings. Information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

Due to the small number of employees in the organization and, in some cases, the specialized roles that some individuals hold at Ed Navigator, some statements may be traceable to certain members of the organization. The use of pseudonyms and general descriptors, like “managers” or “administrators,” will diminish your identifiability, but the consequence of naming the organization in any potential research reports and interviewing a small pool of employees is that I cannot guarantee your confidentiality. Consequently, I will explain these conditions clearly prior to the interview and ask you if you would prefer not to be interviewed.

The investigator may share aggregated data containing employees' and parents' responses to interview question with Ed Navigator to provide their organization with feedback. In this case, aggregated data will de-identify you.

Compensation

At the conclusion of the interview, I will give you a $30 dollar digital gift card as a way to thank you for your time and patience.

Right to Withdraw and Questions

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.

If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:

Jason Saltmarsh
3942 Campus Dr. College Park, MD 20742 jsalt@umd.edu
504-655-4743

or the principal investigator’s advisor:

Dr. Campbell Scribner
cfscrib@umd.edu
2210b Benjamin Building, College Park, MD 20742 301-405-3324

Participant Rights

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research related injury, please contact:
University of Maryland College Park Institutional Review Board Office 1204 Marie Mount Hall
College Park, Maryland, 20742
E-mail: irb@umd.edu Telephone: 301-405-0678
For more information regarding participant rights, please visit:
https://research.umd.edu/irb-research-participants
This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

Statement of Consent

Your electronic signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age, you have read the consent form or have had it read to you, your questions have been answered to your satisfaction, and you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. You will receive a copy of this consent form to the email address you provide.

1. Type your first and last name below if you agree to participate in this study.
2. Type your first and last initials below if you agree to be audio recorded during the interview.
3. Type your first and last initials below if you agree to be video recorded during the interview.
4. To receive your $30 digital gift card, please type your email address below.
5. Today's date

Appendix C: Institutional Review Board Status

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

DATE: July 8, 2022

TO: Jason Saltmarsh

FROM: University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1923885-1] Navigator Services and School Decision Partnerships

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: July 8, 2022

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 45CFR46.104(d)(2)(ii)

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at 301-405-4212 or irb@umd.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB's records.

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