

Fumbling for an Exit Key: Parents, Choice, and the Future of NCLB

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Parents are the linchpins in any school choice initiative—whether vouchers, intra- or interdistrict public school choice, voluntary desegregation plans, or the choice and supplemental services provisions of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). What parents know about and want for their child's education critically defines the level of interest in school choice, and hence sets in motion (or not) all of the possibilities for competitive pressures and systemic change that reform-minded advocates espouse. If parents are basically satisfied with their child's teacher and school, or if they have insufficient information about alternative schooling options, or if they express little desire to disrupt their child's current education, then choice initiatives will not get off the ground.

In an effort to explain why so few children are taking advantage of the choice provisions of NCLB—either by switching out of public schools deemed "in need of improvement" or requesting supplemental services from private providers—some attention in this volume has been cast toward the obstructionist behaviors of state and local bureaucrats, superintendents, and school board members. And for good reason. All of these political actors have a vested interest in minimizing NCLB's effect on a district by keeping children in their current public schools. Still, even if policymakers are able to rework the accountability system so that political actors throughout our system of separated and federated powers freely and enthusiastically promote the act's public school choice and supplemental services provisions, widespread enrollment changes are hardly a foregone conclusion. NCLB does not mandate change, it merely presents some public school parents with new

educational options. Whether these parents will take advantage of these options, and whether they can correctly assess the best needs of their children when doing so, remain very much open questions.

Curiously, several years after the law's enactment, we still do not know whether NCLB effectively meets parents' wants and wishes. To be sure, some excellent research examines parents' educational priorities within the existing public school system;¹ other scholarship, meanwhile, surveys parents' professed interest in school vouchers and charter schools.² Unfortunately, none of these surveys deals specifically with the options NCLB avails to families with children in underperforming public schools. And there is good reason to believe that parents' interest in policies like school vouchers (or charter schools, or magnet schools) does not illuminate the likely choices they will make in a highly restricted, intradistrict, public school choice program. If scholars across the political spectrum have settled on one truth about school choice, it is this: the fate of a program ultimately rides on the particular ways it is structured, the population it targets, and the resources it brings to bear. All of the action is in the details, and analysts who generalize from yesterday's policy initiative to today's do so at considerable peril.

The Thirty-fifth Annual Phi Delta-Kappa/Gallup poll, released in September 2003, does contain measures of public attitudes toward NCLB.³ Much of the survey aims to reveal public attitudes toward the law itself, asking whether citizens think testing is a good way of assessing school performance; whether the federal, state, or local government should retain primary responsibility over the governance of schools; whether subjects other than math and English ought to be included in determinations of student and school progress; and whether standards should differ for special education students. Interesting though these policy items may be, they tell us very little about how NCLB actually functions in local communities. Ultimately, it does not much matter whether parents endorse the law as it is currently written, or whether they think improvements to public education are better sought via alternative policy avenues. What matters are the practical choices that parents make within a given educational context, a subject about which the PDK/Gallup poll is largely silent.⁴

Lost in the contemporary debate over accountability and choice is any serious, systematic effort to answer a central question: if given the option, who would most likely pursue the specific educational opportunities that are presented to parents with children attending schools deemed in need of improvement? This chapter takes some preliminary steps toward formulating an answer. It does not advance, or test, elaborate theories of social networks or consumer behaviors. Its aim is considerably more modest, and its

formulation is inductive rather than deductive in nature. To assist policymakers intent on expanding schooling options in the current education system, this chapter establishes some basic facts about public school parents' knowledge of and interest in their children's education generally, and in NCLB in particular.

Drawing from a telephone survey of public school parents in the state of Massachusetts, this chapter presents original findings that are organized around two topics.⁵ The first involves parents' knowledge of NCLB. How much information about NCLB do parents have? Where are they learning about NCLB? Do the targeted parents have the necessary information? Or is knowledge about the new educational opportunities primarily reserved for more advantaged families attending higher-performing public schools? The second set of questions, meanwhile, concerns parents' interest in NCLB's public school choice and supplemental services provisions. How satisfied are parents with their child's current public school? Are those parents whose children attend underperforming public schools systematically less satisfied than those whose children attend schools that made AYP? Are the newly available public schooling options likely to attract many families? Or do other schooling options (charter schools, public school in other districts, or private schools) generate more enthusiasm?

Examining parents' knowledge of and interest in NCLB, two basic findings emerge:

1. Though parents claim to be familiar with NCLB, the vast majority of those who in fact qualify for the act's choice and supplemental services provisions do not know that their child's school is on the state's list of public schools that failed to make adequate yearly progress toward proficiency standards.
2. Parents with children in schools deemed in need of improvement are especially interested in pursuing alternative schooling options; this interest, however, does not derive from pointed dissatisfaction with their current schools, and it is regularly directed toward options that NCLB does not afford—specifically, private schools.

These facts, in combination, help elucidate why so few families have either sought supplemental services from private providers or requested transfers to higher performing public schools in their districts. They also suggest that demand will not rise until communications with parents improve. If lawmakers are to promote NCLB's choice and supplemental services provisions effectively, they must do more than revisit the language of the law itself. They must embark on a public relations campaign that speaks directly to parents,

that informs them of their new rights and options, just as it responds to their particular interests and needs.

The Survey

During the summer of 2003, one thousand public school parents in Massachusetts' 10 largest school districts were surveyed. One quarter of the stratified listed sample consisted of parents living in Boston, another quarter of parents in Springfield, another in Worcester, and the final drawn randomly from parents in Brockton, Lynn, Lowell, New Bedford, Lawrence, Fall River, and Newton.⁶ The reason for focusing on these larger districts is straightforward: the vast majority of Massachusetts' 489 school districts have just a handful of elementary schools and one or two middle and high schools. Given that NCLB mandates opportunities for school transfers within, but not across, districts, few parents in underperforming rural schools can be expected to move their children to higher-performing schools. The survey, as such, focuses on the larger districts simply because it is there that NCLB stands the greatest chance of effecting change.

Surveys were conducted over the telephone in either English or Spanish and generally required 15 to 20 minutes to complete. To qualify, households had to have at least one child in a public school, and questions were directed only to parents or guardians of this child.⁷ In 72 percent of the cases, the respondent was the child's mother, 22 percent the father, 3 percent a grandparent, and the rest were other relatives. (Hereafter, respondents are referred to as parents.) When families had more than one child, respondents were asked about the youngest attending a public school. As such, elementary school children were the subject of a disproportionate share of the interviews.⁸ Before abandoning a telephone number, it was called a total of 15 times, usually spread out over several weeks. The adjusted response rate was 31 percent, which is roughly on par with most telephone surveys.⁹ To the extent that this survey over-sampled socio-economically more advantaged families, it likely overstates the level of knowledge that parents have about NCLB; if such families were more successful at placing their child in a preferred public school, the survey also understates the level of interest in NCLB's choice provisions.¹⁰

From the outset, some additional caveats are in order. This chapter takes a distinctly behavioral orientation. It identifies what Massachusetts parents know about and want for their child's education *at a given moment and within a given context*. The findings herein represent a snapshot of

Massachusetts parents two years after NCLB's enactment, and lessons drawn may apply only imperfectly to other states and times. Moreover, the survey does not provide much basis on which to levy blame—either on parents, teachers, or district administrators—for perceived lapses in knowledge, much less for failings in school performance. The survey's strengths lie in specifying what parents know and want, and less in why they know or want it.

Knowledge

When asked, Massachusetts parents claim to know a fair amount about NCLB. Among those surveyed, 69 percent profess to have heard of the act; 52 percent to know about the option of switching from an underperforming school to one that made AYP; and 46 percent to have heard about the availability of supplemental services. Of those who say they have heard about NCLB, 59 percent received their information from the media, 24 percent from the school district, 7 percent from other parents, 3 percent from friends and family, and the rest from assorted sources. As conventional wisdom suggests that average citizens pay little attention to politics and lack basic information about the contents of public policy, these figures would appear to reflect remarkably well on Massachusetts parents.¹¹ Unfortunately, though, they do not hold up to scrutiny.

The centerpiece of the federal government's accountability system consists of assessments of public schools' annual yearly progress (AYP) toward state-mandated proficiency standards. From these determinations, penalties are directed to schools and districts, just as benefits flow to parents and students. To navigate the educational landscape, and to seize upon new schooling opportunities, it is vital that parents know the status of their child's school. Without information about whether their child qualifies for the act's choice and supplemental services provisions, parents' general awareness of NCLB does them little good.

Overall, 25 percent of the Massachusetts parents surveyed had children who attended schools that failed to make AYP. But when asked whether their child's school was on the list of underperforming schools, only 6 percent of parents responded affirmatively.¹² Something, plainly, is amiss.¹³

Using self reports to assess knowledge about policy matters is always a tricky business. Indeed, in many ways the history of survey research constitutes a long cautionary tale about the problems of taking people at their word. For a wide variety of reasons, what people say in the context of telephone surveys does not reliably match what they believe, know, or do. In this

instance, parents have ample incentives to feign knowledge of matters about which they have very little information and to overestimate their ability to place their child in a successful public school—both of which effectively distort assessments of parental awareness of NCLB and the characteristics of children that the act intends to reach.

Fortunately, we do not need to rely exclusively on what parents tell us. Because the survey asked for the name of their child's school, we can use State Department of Education administrative records to verify their responses. Doing so, a more sobering view of parental awareness begins to emerge. For starters, only 49 percent of surveyed parents in Massachusetts could correctly identify whether their child's school made AYP, which assuredly represents an upper bound on knowledge, as an unknown percentage of parents guessed correctly the status of their child's school. Forty percent of parents admitted not knowing whether their child's school made AYP, and the remaining 11 percent incorrectly identified the status of their child's school.¹⁴

As the results in table 8.1 demonstrate, parents have markedly different amounts of information about the status of their children's schools. Unfortunately, the observed disparities point in a direction exactly opposite of what one would hope. Parents with children who attend performing public schools generally know that their child's school is not on the list of underperforming public schools, but parents with children in underperforming schools generally do not know that their school is, and hence lack the most basic information needed to acquire the NCLB benefits that they are due. Fully 57 percent of parents with a child attending a performing public school know the school's status, as compared to just 29 percent of families with a child in an underperforming school—even though districts were formally required to notify only parents of children at underperforming schools about the status of their schools. Parents with a child in an underperforming public school are 5 percentage points more likely to claim that they do not know

Table 8.1. Do parents with children at underperforming schools know the status of their child's school?

	Percent "don't know"	Percent answer incorrectly	Percent answer correctly	(N)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	
All parents	39.9	11.3	48.8	(964)
Parents with child attending performing school	36.9	5.8	57.3	(703)
Parents with child attending underperforming school	42.0	28.8	29.2	(232)

the school's status, and fully 5 times more likely to get it wrong when they claim that they do know.¹⁵

Part of the trouble here, I suspect, is that when parents lack facts to the contrary, they assume that their child's school meets the grade. After all, who wants to admit, especially to a stranger on the telephone, that they send their child to a poor public school? This predisposition would explain the kind of imbalances observed in table 8.1: when guessing, parents with children in performing public schools are more likely to answer correctly than parents with children in underperforming public schools. It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss this empirical phenomenon as an artifact of survey research. Indeed, immediate policy consequences are apparent. In addition to overcoming districts' reluctance to promote the act's choice and supplemental services provisions, NCLB advocates also must find ways to break through parents' preconceptions about their child's school quality. More to the point, spreading the word about NCLB's benefits entails convincing many parents that their children's public schools are not as good—at least, according to state standards—as they think they are.

Cognitive dissonance, however, does not constitute the only barrier to knowledge, for parents at performing and underperforming schools also retain different levels of information about other aspects of their children's schools. Again, using administrative records to verify parental responses, I was able to identify which parents knew the name of their child's school principal and the size of their child's school. The results break down along much the same lines as those previously observed. Whereas 58 percent of parents at public schools that made AYP were able to correctly name their child's principal, 49 percent of parents with children at underperforming schools could do so. Similarly, when asked about the size of their child's school, 46 percent of parents of children at performing schools picked the right population range, as compared to 23 percent of parents of children in underperforming schools. Either because underperforming schools are doing a poor job of communicating with parents or because parents are insufficiently involved in their child's education (or both), parents of children in schools that failed to make AYP have less information about a wide variety of aspects of their child's education than parents of children at schools that did so.¹⁶

Of course, attendance at an underperforming school is not the only predictor of knowledge. Systematically, minority and disadvantaged parents have less information about their child's school than do white and more advantaged parents. Take a look at the results presented in table 8.2. Fully 54 percent of whites correctly identify the status of their child's school, as compared to 44 percent of African Americans, and just 24 percent of

Table 8.2. Parental knowledge of school status under NCLB, by family/student background

	Percent "don't know"	Percent answer incorrectly	Percent answer correctly	(N)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	
<i>Ethnicity</i>				
Whites	34.7	11.2	54.1	(671)
African American	43.3	12.3	44.4	(140)
Hispanic	59.7	16.8	23.5	(62)
<i>Place of Birth</i>				
Born U.S.	37.2	10.5	52.3	(804)
Foreign born	50.4	15.8	33.8	(149)
<i>Education</i>				
High school grad or less	52.8	11.0	36.1	(257)
Some college	42.8	11.4	45.8	(315)
Graduated from 4-year college	26.6	11.0	62.5	(366)
<i>Family income</i>				
Qualify free or reduced lunch	50.8	11.1	38.1	(186)
Does not qualify	35.3	10.9	53.8	(599)
<i>Employment Status</i>				
Employed full time	35.8	12.5	51.8	(601)
Employed part time or less ⁽¹⁾	45.0	9.2	45.8	(299)
<i>Home Ownership</i>				
Home owner	34.1	11.3	54.6	(715)
Renter	53.4	11.4	35.3	(207)
<i>Marital status</i>				
Married	36.0	12.2	51.9	(701)
Single	49.5	8.3	42.2	(221)
<i>Gender</i>				
Male	40.0	11.2	48.8	(232)
Female	39.8	11.4	48.8	(732)
<i>Religion</i>				
Protestant	44.2	11.5	44.3	(257)
Catholic	36.8	11.8	51.5	(422)
Other	33.0	10.3	56.6	(82)
No religion	38.7	7.7	53.6	(96)
Refused	46.2	12.4	41.4	(95)
<i>Attend religious services:</i>				
Once a month or less	36.8	12.0	51.2	(414)
Once a week or more	41.2	10.8	48.0	(440)
<i>Child attends classes for</i>				
Learning/physical disabled	41.0	11.1	47.9	(174)
English as a second language	65.3	9.7	25.0	(62)
Gifted/talented program	26.5	13.6	59.9	(237)
None of the above	42.9	10.5	46.6	(555)

⁽¹⁾ Retired and disabled respondents dropped.

Hispanics. Parents born in the United States are 20 percentage points more likely to know whether their child's school made AYP than foreign-born parents. Home ownership, income, and education all positively contribute to the likelihood that parents correctly identify whether their child attends an underperforming school. More modest, but still positive, impacts are associated with marriage and employment. Plainly, those individuals who face the most discrimination, who are among the least established in their communities, and who can draw upon the fewest educational and financial resources have the lowest levels of information about their child's school. These also are precisely the kinds of families that the act purports to help.

Churches and synagogues are potentially important conduits for information about community affairs. At Saturday and Sunday services, soup kitchens, and clothing drives, congregants have ample opportunities to discuss goings-on in their communities, and to exchange insights about the quality of their local schools. Numerous scholars, what is more, have observed high levels of social capital and connectedness within religious communities.¹⁷ Elsewhere, in the context of a targeted, urban voucher program, I found that parents who regularly attend religious services are more likely to have the necessary knowledge, interest, and wherewithal to apply for vouchers, to find access to a private school, and to remain there over time.¹⁸ Religion and religiosity, however, do not systematically enhance Massachusetts parents' knowledge about their school's status under NCLB. Catholics, Protestants, and members of other religions are generally no more likely to correctly identify whether their child's school made AYP than individuals who claimed not to have any religious affiliation or who declined to answer the question. Parents who occasionally attend religious services are only slightly more likely to know whether their child's school is underperforming than those parents who do so more routinely.

One might expect parents with special-needs children to pay especially high amounts of attention to their child's education, and hence to the quality of their schools. Though average children may easily adapt to a wide variety of educational settings, without adequate accommodations students at the high and low ends of the distribution may suffer both personally and academically, prodding parents to monitor any and all information about their school. With regard to NCLB, however, the evidence on this score is somewhat mixed. Parents of students in gifted/talented programs are 12 percentage points more likely to know the status of their child's school than parents of students without any special needs. Parents with learning-disabled or physically disabled children, however, are no more likely to know whether their child's school made AYP. Meanwhile, limited English proficiency

students come from families who are more than 20 percentage points less likely to know whether their school is underperforming.

One group of parents, however, appears especially informed about their schools: namely, those who already have direct access to the public school system. Take a look at the findings presented in table 8.3. Parents who volunteer at their child's school, who are members of a parent-teacher association, or who work in public school districts are 15 to 22 percentage points more likely to know whether their child's school is underperforming than those who do not. When considering overall levels of access and involvement, the differences are even more striking. Only 32 percent of parents who did not volunteer, who were not a member of the PTA, and who did not work for the public school district knew whether their child's school made AYP, as compared to 52 percent of parents with one of the three affiliations, and fully 64 percent of parents with two or three affiliations.¹⁹ The probability that parents know the status of their child's school literally doubles when moving from the bottom to the top of the involvement scale.

The lesson here is plain: those who need the most information about the performance of their public schools have the least. Unaware that their child attends a school whose students qualify for new transfer opportunities and supplemental services, parents cannot be expected to take advantage of them. Poverty, language barriers, and residential instability further depress the likelihood that parents know about their child's school—and, concomitantly, further inhibit their chances of pursuing the new schooling opportunities

Table 8.3. Parental knowledge of school status under NCLB, by involvement levels

	Percent "don't know"	Percent answer incorrectly	Percent answer correctly	(N)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	
<i>Volunteer at school?</i>				
Yes	32.3	11.0	56.8	(475)
No	46.8	11.8	41.4	(483)
<i>Member of PTA?</i>				
Yes	27.3	10.1	62.7	(358)
No	46.9	12.4	40.8	(596)
<i>Family member works in public school district?</i>				
Yes	23.9	12.8	63.3	(187)
No	43.2	10.9	45.9	(756)
<i>Overall level of involvement:</i>				
None of above affiliations	54.5	13.6	31.9	(312)
One of above affiliations	40.3	7.9	51.9	(307)
Two or more of above affiliations	23.3	12.6	64.1	(322)

available to them. Who is most likely to know about the status of their child's school? Parents with children in performing schools (who do not qualify for NCLB's public school choice and supplemental services provisions); non-Hispanics, the highly educated, and the well-off (who, by virtue of residential choice, already have access to a wide array of schooling options); and families with strong personal and professional ties to the public schools (who are already involved in their child's educational life and are in a position to ensure that existing public resources are directed to their particular needs). The irony could not be sharper: those who thrive in the existing system have the information required to realize that NCLB will not help them any further, while those who struggle lack the information required to explore new schooling options that might improve their lot.

Interest

If NCLB's choice provisions are to catch on, lawmakers must ensure that parents have more than just a base level of knowledge about which schools made AYP and which did not. Lawmakers must offer alternative schooling options that actually appeal to parents, and sufficiently so that parents are willing to disrupt their child's current education in order to obtain them. In three steps, this section assesses the demand side of the equation: first, by measuring parental satisfaction with their current schools, then by examining parental interest in alternative schooling options, and finally by considering the qualities of public schools that matter most to parents. Throughout, the intended beneficiaries of choice under NCLB (namely, parents with children in underperforming public schools) are juxtaposed against the principal population that the act excludes (parents with children in performing public schools).

Parental Satisfaction with Their Current Schools

The chances that parents will explore new education options surely depend on how satisfied they are with their child's current school. Parents who are basically pleased with their child's current school, no matter how the federally mandated accountability system rates it, are not likely to request transfers to higher-performing public schools within their district. NCLB's choice provisions ought to appeal most to those parents who anxiously await opportunities to abandon schools that they themselves perceive as failing.

Table 8.4. Parental satisfaction with current public school

	All parents		Parents with child attending . . .			
			an underperforming school	a performing school		
<i>Grade to school child attends:</i>	<i>(percent)</i>	<i>(percent)</i>	<i>(percent)</i>	<i>(percent)</i>		
A	37.2		28.7	41.5		
B	44.4		44.6	44.0		
C	13.2		16.8	10.6		
D	3.4		6.6	2.5		
F	1.8		3.3	1.3		
Total	100.0	[991]	100.0	[229]	100.0	[698]
<i>Grade to schools in community:</i>						
A	15.8		11.5		16.9	
B	45.4		42.8		47.6	
C	25.6		31.7		22.9	
D	7.9		6.7		8.9	
F	5.3		7.4		4.0	
Total	100.0	[932]	100.0	[216]	100.0	[657]

Number of observations in brackets.

If interest in alternative educational options thrives only in areas of widespread discontent, Massachusetts districts need not worry about children fleeing their public schools in droves. In the surveys, parents were asked to grade their child's school on an A to F scale. Their responses, presented in table 8.4, confirm those found in numerous other studies—namely, parents are basically satisfied with their children's public schools. In this survey, fully 82 percent of parents gave their public school either an A or a B, while just 5 percent gave their school a D or an F. Whatever may be objectively wrong with Massachusetts public schools, parents give them strong votes of confidence.

When focusing on the assessments of NCLB's target population, however, the story changes somewhat. Compare the results in the second and third columns. Though most parents with children in underperforming schools did not know their school's status under NCLB's accountability system, they nonetheless expressed less satisfaction with the quality of their child's education. Parents with children in underperforming schools were 13 percentage points less likely to give their school an A than parents with children in performing schools, just as they were almost three times as likely to give their school a D or an F.²⁰

Though parents express relatively high levels of satisfaction with their own child's schools, the same cannot be said for the schools in their districts as a

whole. Thirty-seven percent of parents gave their child's school an A, but only 16 percent gave the schools in their community the highest mark. And though just 5 percent of parents gave their child's school a D or an F, 13 percent gave their community's schools the lower grades. For the most part, differences between parents attending underperforming and performing public schools are more modest. Though 17 percent of parents with children at schools that made AYP gave their community's schools an A, only 12 percent from underperforming schools did so. At the bottom end of the grading spectrum, meanwhile, the responses of parents with children in performing and underperforming schools are virtually indistinguishable.

Two lessons are apparent here. First, parents are especially critical of other people's public schools. Just as average citizens express considerably higher levels of satisfaction with their own congressional representative than with Congress as a whole,²¹ so do parents rally behind their children's schools while casting occasional aspersions at institutions their own children do not attend. In addition, however, these findings provide an early hint that NCLB's target population might refuse the particular schooling options that the act avails. Though parents at schools that failed to make AYP are less satisfied with their own child's school, they are not overwhelmingly dissatisfied with these schools, nor are they especially keen on the schools in the district as whole. In fact, NCLB's intended beneficiaries think less of their district's public schools than do parents in performing schools—a fact that does not bode especially well for political observers who hoped that the act, at last, would unleash pent up demand for new public schooling options within districts.

Switching Schools

It would be a mistake to conclude that general contentment with existing public schools translates into disinterest in alternative educational options. While questions about parental satisfaction suggest mild curiosity, more direct questions reveal considerable interest in alternative public, charter, and private schools. And once again, differences are regularly observed between those parents with children who qualify for NCLB's choice provisions and those with children who do not.

Take a look at table 8.5. Between 11 and 16 percent of parents claim that they would prefer their child attend a different public school in the same district, a different public school in a different district, or a charter school. And in all three instances, interest is higher among parents with children in schools that failed to make AYP. Though they revealed less satisfaction with

Table 8.5. Parental interest in alternative schooling options

	All parents		Parents with child attending . . .			
			an underperforming school		a performing school	
<i>Percent prefer that child attend.⁽¹⁾</i>	(percent)		(percent)		(percent)	
Diff. Public school in same district	14.5	[995]	23.1	[230]	10.8	[700]
Diff. Public school in diff. district	15.9	[992]	18.1	[231]	15.5	[696]
Charter school	10.9	[987]	18.3	[227]	7.6	[697]
Private school	39.4	[980]	45.0	[226]	38.1	[690]
<i>Percent able to name alternative type of school preferred.⁽²⁾</i>						
Diff. Public school in same district	11.3	[995]	18.8	[230]	8.8	[700]
Charter school	7.2	[987]	12.0	[227]	5.5	[697]
Private school	26.5	[980]	31.3	[226]	26.3	[690]
<i>Among interested parents, type of school most like child to attend.⁽³⁾</i>						
Public school in same district	23.4		18.1		26.0	
Public school in different district	5.8		6.9		5.4	
Charter school	8.2		11.9		6.0	
Private school	58.5		61.6		57.0	
Don't know	4.1		1.5		5.6	
Total	100.0	[539]	100.0	[146]	100.0	[358]

Number of observations in brackets.

⁽¹⁾ Parents could express interest in multiple kinds of alternative schools.

⁽²⁾ Parents who preferred to send their child to a different public school in a different district were not asked to name the school they had in mind.

⁽³⁾ Parents had to choose one type of school for their child. Only those parents who expressed interest in at least one alternative schooling option were included in sample.

their district's public schools than did parents with children in performing public schools, and though they were less likely to know that they qualified for NCLB's choice provisions, parents with children in underperforming schools were more than twice as likely to express interest in switching public schools. One in four parents in underperforming public schools claim that they would prefer to send their child to a different public school in the same district, as compared to one in ten parents with children in performing public schools. Much the same pattern of findings applies to public schools in different districts and charter schools.²²

Parents who preferred that their child attend a different school were asked to name an alternative—allowing us to distinguish parents with passing interests from those with stronger commitments to new schooling options. Demand, once again, appears highest among families with children in underperforming schools. As the second batch of items in table 8.5 shows, parents

with children in underperforming public schools are more than twice as likely to name a preferred alternative public school in their district or a charter school than are parents with children in schools that made AYP.

The bigger story in table 8.5, however, concerns private schools. More than any other educational institution, parents appear most enthusiastic about the prospects of sending their child to a private school. Fully 40 percent of parents generally, and 45 percent of parents in underperforming schools, claim that "if cost were not an obstacle" they would rather send their child to a private school instead of their current public school. And a surprisingly high percentage of these parents have a particular private school in mind. Roughly one in three parents with children in underperforming schools both prefers that her child attend a private school and is able to name a specific school on the spot, many of which are elite boarding schools.²³

When reflecting on private schooling options, observed differences between parents with children in performing and underperforming schools attenuate somewhat. Whereas parents with children in underperforming schools are twice as likely to prefer different public or charter schools, they are only 5 to 7 percentage points more likely to express interest in sending their child to a private school. Attending a public school with low test scores, it seems, does not appear to be an especially important indicator of parental interest in a private education.

Up until now, survey responses reflect individual comparisons between a child's current public school and one alternative schooling option. But when simultaneously placing all options before them, which type of school would parents "most like their child to attend"? Among parents interested in an alternative to their child's current public school, one stands out: private schools. On the whole, 59 percent of parents hold a private school in highest regard, while 23 percent select another public school in the same district, 8 percent a charter school, and just 6 percent a public school in another district. Ironically, parents in performing schools (who do not qualify for NCLB's choice options) are 8 percentage points more likely to identify another public school in their district that they would like their child to attend (the one option NCLB avails) than are parents with children in underperforming schools (who actually do qualify for NCLB's choice options). Moreover, parents with children in underperforming schools are slightly more likely to prefer that their child attend a public school in another district, a charter school, or a private school (none of which are available under NCLB) than parents with children in performing public schools.

These findings have mixed implications for NCLB. On the upside, while the parental satisfaction data reveal general contentment with public schools,

these data suggest that many parents nonetheless remain interested in exploring alternative schooling options. Interest, what is more, appears most concentrated among parents with children attending underperforming public schools—precisely the people whom NCLB targets. On the downside, however, parents appear most excited about schooling options that NCLB does not afford. Indeed, parents were three to four times more likely to identify a preferred private school than an alternative public school within their district, a different public school outside their district, or a charter school—and when looking at parents' "most preferred" options, the differences are even greater. When reflecting on their child's education, and when relieved of financial constraints, what these parents want most is a private education.

Criteria for Choosing

By extending new schooling opportunities to families with children in underperforming public schools, NCLB gives qualifying parents greater influence over their child's education. But whether the act should enhance parental influence is another matter entirely. For starters, when selecting among a district's public schools, qualifying parents may not abide by their child's best interests. Rather than selecting a school because of its academic strengths, parents may pay special attention to such ancillary matters as its location or its racial composition.²⁴ Further, parents may fail to choose a school that is any better than the one their child currently attends. Given that many do not know whether their child's school made AYP, parents whose children qualify for NCLB's choice provisions may prove incapable of assessing the quality of other district schools.

To investigate these matters, the survey asked parents to rate on a 1-to-10 scale—where 1 is unimportant and 10 is extremely important—the relative significance of nine factors when selecting a school for their child. The results are presented in table 8.6. Two features of the findings deserve attention, both of which suggest a rather salutary view of parents. The first concerns the rank ordering of school characteristics. To parents, quality of teaching, discipline, safety and order, and class size are far and away the most important qualities of a school, while location, racial/ethnic composition, and the prevalence of friends are the least important. Moderately important items include programs such as physical education, a school's reputation, and extracurricular programs and sports teams.

Second, when comparing the responses of parents at performing and underperforming public schools, both the average rating and rank ordering

Table 8.6. Factors influencing parental assessments of schooling options

	All parents		Parents with child attending . . .			
			an underperforming school		a performing school	
<i>Importance of following factors in evaluating a school.</i>						
Quality of teaching	9.6	[997]	9.6	[232]	9.6	[702]
Discipline, safety, and order	9.4	[998]	9.4	[232]	9.4	[701]
Class size	8.7	[994]	9.2	[230]	8.6	[701]
Programs such as physical education	8.3	[997]	8.4	[231]	8.3	[701]
Reputation of school	8.1	[995]	8.5	[232]	7.9	[698]
Extracurricular programs & sports teams	7.8	[987]	7.9	[230]	7.8	[694]
Distance from house	6.8	[986]	7.3	[228]	6.6	[695]
Racial/ethnic: composition of school	6.2	[978]	6.6	[229]	6.2	[687]
Friends at school	5.8	[983]	5.9	[225]	5.8	[695]

Number of observations in brackets. The second set of items are rated on a 1–10 scale, with 1 indicating not important at all and 10 indicating extremely important

of factors are virtually identical. Both groups give quality of teaching and discipline average values of 9.6 and 9.4, and both rank location, racial/ethnic composition of schools, and friends as the least important factors when evaluating a school. The only difference—which, statistically, may be due to chance alone—concerns the relative importance of programs such as physical education (which parents of children attending schools that made AYP ranked as slightly more important) and a school's reputation (which parents of children at underperforming school deem more important). Given scholars' general skepticism of the ability of less advantaged parents to advocate on behalf of their child's educational welfare,²⁵ these findings are especially noteworthy. When selecting schools, parents with children at underperforming schools—who are less likely to be white, are less educated, have lower incomes, and are more likely to be foreign born—claim to care about the same things as parents with children at performing schools.

To be sure, the factors parents claim to care about most may not reflect the actual choices they would make for their child. Few whites, presumably, would admit to a stranger on the telephone that they care more about the racial composition of a school than the quality of its teaching, even if, in practice, they might choose a predominantly white school with poor teachers over a predominantly African American school with excellent teachers.

Unfortunately, we do not have any outside measures of parental attitudes or behaviors that allow us to verify the existence or magnitude of response bias. We do, however, know the names of the schools that parents purport to prefer, establishing some grounds for advancing this line of inquiry. Specifically, by comparing the characteristics of those schools parents prefer to those their children currently attend, we may further evaluate the capacity of parents to identify schools that excel academically.

The first section of table 8.7 compares average Massachusetts Comprehensive Achievement System test scores of the school that parents prefer to the scores at the school their children currently attend. Positive values indicate that preferred schools have higher average scores than current schools; negative values that preferred schools have lower scores. Because only a small number of parents prefer a different public school in their

Table 8.7. Characteristics of preferred public schools in district

	All parents	Parents with child attending . . .			
		an underperforming school		a performing school	
<i>Differences between test scores of preferred and current public school</i>					
Third-grade English	0.12 [57]	0.41 [29]	-0.20 [28]		
Fourth-grade English	0.32 [57]	0.56 [29]	0.06 [28]		
Fourth-grade math	0.33 [57]	0.62 [29]	0.00 [28]		
Sixth-grade math	0.46 [26]	0.50 [10]	0.44 [16]		
<i>Differences between student bodies of preferred and current public schools</i>					
% African American students	-2.9 [96]	-9.9 [43]	2.6 [53]		
% Hispanic students	-5.5 [96]	0.6 [43]	-10.4 [53]		
% White students	7.5 [96]	11.9 [43]	3.9 [53]		
% students qualify free/reduced lunch	2.1 [69]	-14.9 [20]	14.5 [40]		
% LEP students	-9.8 [96]	-16.0 [43]	-4.8 [53]		
Total number of enrolled students	112.7 [96]	-43.4 [43]	237.3 [53]		
Percent name a public school that is underperforming:	26.4 [106]	44.1 [44]	15.9 [56]		
Percent name a charter school that is underperforming:	52.0 [87]	54.2 [29]	54.7 [53]		

Parents who expressed interest in an alternative public school and could name the public school are included in this table. Number of observations in brackets. Positive values in first set of questions indicate that the preferred public school within the district that parents identify has higher test scores (expressed in standard deviations) than the public school their child attends. Positive values in the second set of questions indicate that the preferred public school has a higher percentage of students with the identified characteristic than their child's current school.

district and then can name a specific institution, the findings presented in this table are based on a rather limited number of observations. As such, these results should be considered more suggestive than definitive. Nonetheless, they do reveal some intriguing, and somewhat reassuring, findings about the ability of parents to identify successful public schools.

Parents, taken as a whole, consistently identify preferred public schools that score between one-tenth and one-half of a standard deviation higher than their current public schools. When isolating those parents with children in underperforming schools, the observed differences are even higher, ranging between two- and three-fifths of a standard deviation.²⁶ Given the sizable literature on peer effects,²⁷ students at underperforming schools would likely benefit from attending their parents' preferred schools.

Beyond test scores, how do preferred public schools compare to schools that children currently attend? The answer very much depends on whether a child is enrolled in an underperforming public school. Interested parents of children who qualify for NCLB's choice provisions identify schools with lower proportions of African Americans, low-income students, and limited English proficiency students, and higher proportions of white students. They also select schools that are slightly smaller, on average, than the schools their child currently attends. Among parents with children in performing schools, minor differences are observed with respect to the percentage of Hispanic, white, African American, and limited English proficiency students. Such parents, however, do choose schools with lower proportions of Hispanic students and higher proportions of low-income students. They also tend to express interest in larger schools than those their children currently attend.

But take a look at the last two rows of table 8.7. When asked to name a specific public or charter school that they would prefer their child attend, a remarkably high percentage of interested parents actually select another underperforming school—an option that NCLB forbids. Fully one in four parents select a public school that is deemed underperforming, and one in two select a charter school that failed to make AYP. While parents with children in performing and underperforming public school are equally likely to select a charter school that failed to make AYP, striking differences emerge when parents choose among a district's public schools. Parents with children in underperforming schools are almost three times as likely to select another underperforming school as are parents with children in performing public schools. Using NCLB's evaluative criteria, fully 44 percent of parents who qualify for transfers want to send their child to another school that is no better than the one their child currently attends—even though the test score and

demographic data suggest that preferred schools house higher-performing and more advantaged students.

Two basic findings stand out here, and both speak positively of parents whose children are enrolled in underperforming public schools. First, though parents who qualify for NCLB's choice provisions navigate their educational landscape with less information, they nonetheless purport to care about the same features of schools—foremost among them being academics—as parents whose children attend performing public schools. Second, when selecting an alternative public school for their child, interested parents in underperforming schools consistently identify schools with more advantaged and higher-performing students. To be sure, many of the chosen schools themselves failed to make AYP. And without data on the quality of the teachers or the resources at these institutions, it is difficult to assess whether the schools themselves are any better. Still, if their student bodies are any indication, these preferred schools nonetheless outperform the public schools from which interested parents wish to withdraw their children.

Concluding Thoughts and Policy Recommendations

As some of the other chapters in this volume make clear, there are ample reasons for criticizing state determinations of annual yearly progress. NCLB largely disregards the independent contributions of teachers, principals, and programs to a child's education. Its accountability system holds schools accountable for the performance of multiple subgroups while failing to account for student mobility rates, and hence is predisposed to reward racially homogeneous schools that attract higher-performing students and to punish heterogeneous schools that cater to lower-performing student bodies. And by measuring student achievement strictly, and solely, on the basis of standardized tests, the act disregards important aspects of student learning.

This chapter, and the survey on which it is based, deliberately does not comment on NCLB's language or design. Instead, it takes as given state determinations of school performance in order to scrutinize the choices and preferences of parents within a given educational context. It provides an early assessment of parental knowledge of and interest in new educational opportunities, and the challenges faced by advocates of choice and accountability who aim to boost parental control over and involvement in children's education.

The survey results reveal considerable interest in new public and private schooling options, especially among parents whose children attend

underperforming public schools. Though parents who qualify for NCLB's choice provisions give their schools high marks, they nonetheless appear less satisfied than parents with children in performing schools; they are more likely to prefer to send their child to an alternative public, charter, or private school, and most have in mind a specific school that they would prefer their child attend. Furthermore, when choosing among alternative schools, these parents consistently identify institutions whose students score higher on standardized tests.

Given such interest, why have so few parents transferred schools under NCLB? (Statewide, less than 1 percent of eligible parents have opted to switch out of a public school deemed in need of improvement). In addition to the structural issues identified elsewhere in this volume, lack of knowledge appears critical. Only one out of every four parents with children in underperforming Massachusetts public schools successfully identified the school's status, and hence grasped the most basic information required to take advantage of NCLB's choice and supplemental services provisions. Whether the onus of blame lies with parents or schools, information simply is not getting to those individuals who need it most.

To raise awareness of NCLB's accountability system and increase the number of students who seize upon its educational benefits, three policy changes are recommended:

1. First, and most obviously, state and federal governments should not rely on districts to disseminate information about which schools have made AYP, and which students hence qualify for transfers and supplemental services. If parents are to take advantage of new educational opportunities, they first must know about them. State and federal governments need to find ways to communicate directly with parents to ensure that they do.
2. Second, when disseminating information about NCLB, special accommodations must be made on behalf of non-English-speaking families. The poor knowledge revealed among parents of children attending underperforming schools was matched only by foreign born and parents lacking proficiency in English. Only one in three parents born outside of the United States, and one in four parents of a limited English proficiency child, knew whether or not their school was underperforming.²⁸ If these families are to seize upon NCLB's choice provisions, state and federal governments must find ways of effectively communicating with them.
3. Finally, and perhaps most controversially, parents with children at underperforming public schools should be allowed to select any other public

school in their district, not just those public schools that made AYP. Almost 50 percent of qualifying and interested parents claimed that they preferred another underperforming public school; and if the test score comparisons between these schools are any indication, they were not misguided in doing so.²⁹ If choice is to catch fire, as many NCLB advocates hope, parents must be granted a wider array of schooling options than the law currently affords.

Other policy reforms, of course, might also be entertained. For instance, if choice advocates truly want to satisfy parents, they should add private schools to the menu of available education options. By overwhelming margins, parents prefer private schools over any other alternative schooling option. Plainly, however, efforts to include private schools in publicly funded choice schemes are bound to confront serious, and perhaps insurmountable, political obstacles. Each of the three recommended reforms, meanwhile, is more easily implemented. For the most part, they simply require modest financial commitments and rule changes. Were they adopted, NCLB would stand a considerably better chance of meeting parents' current knowledge of and interest in school choice, and would promote greater participation in the program than witnessed up until now.

Appendix A: Multivariate models of parental knowledge about child's school

	Correctly identify school status			Correctly identify principal's name			Correctly identify school size					
	(1a)	(1b)	(2a)	(2b)	(3a)	(3b)						
Attends underperforming school	-1.06***	(0.24)	-1.01***	(0.24)	-0.56**	(0.23)	-0.27	(0.24)	-1.07***	(0.25)	-1.01***	(0.27)
<i>Parent Characteristics</i>												
African American	0.20	(0.33)	0.06	(0.34)	-0.20	(0.30)	-0.26	(0.32)	-1.22***	(0.36)	-1.17***	(0.37)
Hispanic	-1.19*	(0.64)	-1.30**	(0.66)	-0.07	(0.38)	-0.12	(0.44)	-0.45	(0.47)	-0.50	(0.47)
Born in United States	0.42	(0.30)	0.39	(0.30)	0.36	(0.27)	0.55*	(0.31)	0.24	(0.30)	0.21	(0.31)
Education	1.29***	(0.50)	1.05**	(0.51)	1.20**	(0.49)	1.22**	(0.53)	1.02**	(0.50)	0.83	(0.51)
Work full time	0.35*	(0.21)	0.39*	(0.21)	-0.24	(0.21)	-0.30	(0.21)	-0.52***	(0.20)	-0.55***	(0.21)
Own home	0.32	(0.26)	0.30	(0.26)	0.18	(0.26)	0.21	(0.26)	0.16	(0.25)	0.20	(0.25)
Married	-0.02	(0.24)	-0.01	(0.25)	0.16	(0.25)	0.20	(0.23)	-0.14	(0.26)	-0.17	(0.26)
Female	0.13	(0.23)	0.15	(0.24)	0.33	(0.23)	0.38	(0.24)	-0.05	(0.23)	-0.06	(0.22)
Freq. attend relig. services	0.05	(0.36)	-0.03	(0.36)	0.02	(0.32)	0.35	(0.33)	-0.24	(0.35)	-0.28	(0.35)
Catholic	0.19	(0.29)	0.39	(0.31)	-0.11	(0.25)	-0.26	(0.29)	0.13	(0.28)	0.17	(0.30)
Protestant	-0.05	(0.34)	0.06	(0.35)	-0.07	(0.28)	-0.29	(0.31)	0.23	(0.32)	0.27	(0.32)
<i>Child Characteristics</i>												
Special needs	0.07	(0.20)	0.09	(0.20)	-0.15	(0.20)	-0.12	(0.19)	-0.08	(0.19)	-0.02	(0.19)
Elementary school	0.02	(0.20)	0.07	(0.21)	0.88***	(0.21)	0.98***	(0.21)	-0.04	(0.21)	-0.04	(0.21)
Boy	0.22	(0.20)	0.25	(0.20)	-0.08	(0.19)	-0.13	(0.19)	0.29	(0.19)	0.29	(0.19)
<i>Parental Involvement</i>												
Volunteer at school	0.37*	(0.21)	0.41*	(0.21)	0.66***	(0.20)	0.57***	(0.21)	0.38*	(0.21)	0.45**	(0.21)
PTA member	0.62***	(0.22)	0.58***	(0.22)	0.33	(0.23)	0.56**	(0.23)	0.25	(0.22)	0.20	(0.23)
Work public school district	0.52**	(0.27)	0.55**	(0.26)	-0.18	(0.24)	-0.06	(0.23)	0.18	(0.24)	0.22	(0.24)
Constant	-2.00***	(0.55)	-1.44**	(0.65)	-1.49***	(0.56)	-1.66**	(0.66)	-0.66	(0.53)	0.12	(0.63)
Pseudo-R ²	.12		.14		.10		.16		.11		.13	
Log likelihood	-474.13		-467.62		-479.66		-447.06		-467.87		-458.04	
Number of observations	781		781		781		781		775		775	
District fixed effects included	No		No		No		Yes		No		Yes	

Weighted logit models estimated with robust standard errors reported in parentheses. * p < .10, two tailed test; ** p < .05; *** p < .01. The dependent variable is coded 1 if respondent correctly identified status of school (models 1a and 1b), the principal's name (2a and 2b), or the school size (3a and 3b), and 0 otherwise. All explanatory variables rescaled 0-1. Given high number of missing values, income not included in models; most estimates, however, appear unchanged when it is added.

	Give child's current public school an "A"		Give public schools in community an "A"	
	(1a)	(1b)	(2a)	(2b)
Attend underperforming school	-0.50**	(0.24)	-0.55**	(0.25)
<i>Parent characteristics:</i>				
African American	0.17	(0.31)	0.09	(0.33)
Hispanic	-0.29	(0.45)	-0.40	(0.46)
Born in United States	-0.24	(0.29)	-0.23	(0.29)
Education	0.52	(0.48)	0.23	(0.48)
Work full time	-0.41**	(0.20)	-0.43**	(0.20)
Own home	0.31	(0.25)	0.39	(0.26)
Married	-0.32	(0.25)	-0.25	(0.26)
Female	-0.33	(0.22)	-0.32	(0.23)
Freq. attend relig. services	0.44	(0.35)	0.36	(0.33)
Catholic	-0.13	(0.26)	-0.09	(0.27)
Protestant	0.44	(0.31)	0.40	(0.31)
<i>Child Characteristics:</i>				
Special needs	-0.01	(0.19)	0.00	(0.19)
Elementary school	0.38*	(0.21)	0.40*	(0.21)
Boy	-0.30	(0.19)	-0.30	(0.19)
<i>Parental Involvement</i>				
Volunteer at school	0.04	(0.20)	0.07	(0.21)
PTA member	0.35*	(0.21)	0.23	(0.21)
Work public school	0.11	(0.23)	0.18	(0.24)
Constant	-0.16	(0.52)	0.15	(0.62)
Pseudo-R ²	.04		.07	
Log likelihood	-500.25		-486.94	
Number of observations	781		781	
District fixed effects included:	No	Yes	No	Yes

Weighted logit models estimated with robust standard errors reported in parentheses. * p < .10, two tailed test; ** p < .05; *** p < .01. The dependent variable is coded 1 if parent gave either the child school (models 1a and 1b) or the public schools in the community (models 2a and 2b) an "A" and zero otherwise. All explanatory variables rescaled 0-1. Given high number of missing values, income not included in models; most estimates, however, appear unchanged when it is added.

Appendix C: Multivariate models of parental interest in alternative public and private schools

	Interested in public school alternative to current public school		Interested in private school alternative to current public school	
	(1a)	(1b)	(2a)	(2b)
Attend underperforming school	0.36	(0.24)	0.27	(0.25)
<i>Parent characteristics:</i>				
African American	0.11	(0.30)	-0.07	(0.34)
Hispanic	0.18	(0.40)	-0.02	(0.41)
Born in United States	-0.30	(0.27)	-0.38	(0.27)
Education	-0.35	(0.47)	-0.21	(0.49)
Work full time	0.03	(0.21)	0.00	(0.23)
Own home	-0.49*	(0.28)	-0.57*	(0.29)
Married	0.23	(0.25)	0.42	(0.29)
Female	0.07	(0.24)	0.09	(0.24)
Freq. attend relig. Services	0.22	(0.33)	0.12	(0.36)
Catholic	-0.08	(0.28)	0.08	(0.31)
Protestant	0.11	(0.30)	0.22	(0.32)
<i>Child Characteristics:</i>				
Special needs	-0.12	(0.20)	-0.16	(0.21)
Elementary school	0.56**	(0.23)	0.68**	(0.24)
Boy	0.36*	(0.20)	0.39*	(0.21)
<i>Parental Involvement</i>				
Volunteer at school	0.09	(0.22)	0.06	(0.23)
PTA member	-0.12	(0.24)	-0.15	(0.23)
Work public school	-0.35	(0.25)	-0.36	(0.24)
Constant	0.36	(0.22)	0.30	(0.24)

Appendix C: Continued

	Interested in public school alternative to current public school		Interested in private school alternative to current public school	
	(1a)	(1b)	(2a)	(2b)
Constant	-1.03*	(0.55)	-1.48**	(0.68)
Pseudo-R ²	.06	.10	-0.90*	(0.52)
Log likelihood	-449.79	-430.43	.04	.06
Number of observations	781	781	-503.22	-494.72
District fixed effects included:	No	Yes	781	781
			No	Yes

Weighted logit models estimated with robust standard errors reported in parentheses. * $p < .10$, two tailed test; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$. The dependent variable in models 1a and 1b is coded 1 if respondent expressed interest in alternative public school in district, alternative public school in another district, or in alternative charter school, and zero otherwise. The dependent variable in models 2a and 2b is coded 1 if respondent expressed interest in alternative private school, and zero otherwise. All explanatory variables rescaled 0-1. Given high number of missing values, income not included in models; most estimates, however, appear unchanged when it is added.

Notes

1. Mark Schneider, Paul Teske, and Melissa Marschall, *Choosing Schools: Consumer Choice and the Quality of American Schools* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000). See also, Terry M. Moe, *Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001).
2. Moe, *Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public*. See also, Public Agenda 1999. "On Thin Ice: How Advocates and Opponents could Mislead the Public's Views on Vouchers and Charter Schools." Report available online at: www.publicagenda.org
3. Lowell Rose and Alec Gallup, "The 35th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* (September 2003): 41-56.
4. While the PDK/Gallup poll contains some measures of parental satisfaction, the results basically confirm conventional wisdom—namely, that most parents are happy with their child's current public school. And unfortunately, because the analyses conducted on the poll are rudimentary at best, the findings offer little insight into how various populations with children attending various types of schools systematically differ in their knowledge of and interest in new forms of school choice.
5. To conduct the survey, the author gratefully recognizes the financial and administrative support of the Pioneer Institute in Boston, Massachusetts, Kit Nichols, Elena Llaudet, Kathryn Ciffolillo, and Stephen Adams provided especially helpful feedback and support. Opinion Dynamics in Cambridge, Massachusetts, administered the survey.
6. So that they reflect a random draw of parents in the sampled locales, findings presented in this chapter rely upon weights that account for the sizes of the district populations.
7. In a handful of cases, questions were directed toward parents of children who attend private schools. The results presented below do not change when these cases are excluded from the sample.
8. Students in grades kindergarten through 12 constituted 13.6, 10.7, 9.7, 8.6, 8.2, 6.0, 6.7, 8.7, 5.7, 6.7, 6.2, 6.1, and 1.6 percent of the sample, respectively. In 1.5 percent of the cases, the respondent did not know the student's grade.
9. This estimated response rate assumes that the incident rate among non-compliers (people who did not stay on the telephone long enough for us to determine whether they had children attending a public school) is the same as the incident rate among compliers. If the incident rate among non-compliers is lower, which is likely given the subject of the survey and the population we targeted, then the true response rate is higher than 31 percent.
10. Given data constraints, comparisons between the population sampled and the population targeted are less than straightforward. Neither of the two available data sources identifies the specific characteristics of parents of children who

attended public schools in the 10 largest districts. From the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), one can obtain information on the profile of residents (but not public school parents) in the 10 largest districts. And from the Massachusetts Department of Education, one can obtain information on students (but not parents) in the 10 largest districts. Unfortunately, as of this writing, individual level data from the 2000 Census are available only for Boston and Massachusetts as a whole. The available data, nonetheless, suggest that the survey contains the right approximate proportion of African Americans, an undersample of Hispanics, and an oversample of whites. (Given the varying methods of collecting demographic data, race/ethnicity provides the cleanest of comparisons). In the survey, 73 percent of parents are white, 17 percent African American, and 7 percent Hispanic. NCES records show that 59 percent of residents in the 10 largest school districts are white, 14 percent are African American, and 16 percent Hispanic. Department of Education records, meanwhile, show that 36 percent are white, 26 percent African American, and 29 percent Hispanic. Given that Hispanic families tend to have more children, department figures probably overstate the extent to which Hispanics are underrepresented in the survey. Nonetheless, the magnitude of the observed discrepancies is sufficiently large to warrant concern. The problem, I suspect, derives from the use of a listed sample (which contains a disproportionate number of more stable and white individuals) and the fact that data were collected from telephone surveys (which tend to undersample minorities generally, and Hispanics in particular). Those Hispanic parents who are included in the survey, it is fair to assume, probably speak better English, completed more education, and are more likely to own their own home than the larger population of Hispanics targeted. To the extent that this is true, then the survey will overestimate knowledge of NCLB among Hispanics in particular, and among public school parents more generally.

11. Phillip Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. D. Apter (New York: Free Press, 1964).
12. Two accountability systems currently are in place in Massachusetts, one that was introduced at the behest of the state government, the other at the behest of the federal government. Never are parents asked about the state's older accountability system. Still, to minimize confusion, the survey includes two questions about No Child Left Behind before it asks whether a child was on the list of schools deemed in need of improvement. The wording of the informational question, then, is as follows: "According to this new law, each year states must identify the public schools that need improvement. In the fall of 2002, Massachusetts publicly announced the list of schools in need of improvement. Do you happen to know whether or not your child's school is on the list?"
13. Asked where they learned about the status of their child's school, 36 percent of parents indicated the district or school, 25 percent a newspaper or television news story, 4 percent other parents, 3 percent the Internet, 2 percent a friend, and the rest did not know the source of the information.

14. Curiously, parents who received their information directly from the school or school district were 4 percentage points *less* likely to correctly identify the status of their school than were parents who received their information from other outlets.
15. Appendix A shows that these differences hold up when conducting multivariate analyses that control for different family background and school characteristics.
16. Again, see appendix A for multivariate analyses.
17. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
18. William Howell, "Dynamic Selection Effects in Urban, Means-Tested School Voucher Programs." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 2004. 22(3): 225-250.
19. The sample of parents is roughly evenly divided into these three categories.
20. See appendix B for multivariate models of parental satisfaction.
21. John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Congress as Public Enemy: Public Attitudes toward American Political Institutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
22. Some of these differences attenuate in multivariate statistical models that control for a wide variety of background controls, suggesting that interest derives from the kinds of families who attend underperforming schools rather than from the status of the schools themselves. See appendix C.
23. Told that "costs were not an obstacle," most of these interested parents appeared to relish the idea of sending their child to an expensive, elite private school. Four of the top five most popular private schools identified by parents were Milton Academy, Worcester Academy, Bancroft Academy, and McDuffie, all independent schools with tuitions that eclipse the monetary values of even the most generous school vouchers offered in public and private programs around the country. Still, roughly one-third of interested parents identified Catholic and Protestant day schools that charge considerably more modest tuitions.
24. Jennifer Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick, *The American Dream and the Public Schools* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
25. Bruce Fuller, Richard Elmore, and Gary Orfield, *Who Chooses? Who Loses? Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996).
26. Test scores for seventh-, eighth-, and tenth-grade students are omitted given the tiny number of observations available. All values for these grade levels remain positive for parents as a whole and for parents with children in underperforming schools.
27. Eric Hanushek, John Kain, and Steven G. Rivkin, "New Evidence about Brown v. Board of Education: The Complex Effects of School Racial Composition on Achievement," *National Bureau of Economic Research*, Working Paper 8741, 2002. See also, Caroline Minter Hoxby, "Peer Effects in the Classroom: Learning from Gender and Race Variation," *National Bureau of Economic Research*, Working Paper 7867, 2002.

28. Given the survey's undersampling of Hispanics, these findings probably *overestimate* the levels of knowledge of NCLB among foreign-born families with limited English proficiency.
29. Still, another, more practical concern supports this policy recommendation. As Massachusetts schools are held accountable for the test scores of subpopulations of students, the list of underperforming schools will undoubtedly rise, further limiting the number of schools that can accept student transfers.

Choice and Supplemental Services in America's Great City Schools

Michael Casserly

Introduction

The school district of Philadelphia is on the list of systems in Pennsylvania that are "in need of improvement." Only 20 percent of the city's fifth-graders met the state's reading standards in 2002. So when Paul Vallas took the reins of the long-struggling district in the summer of 2002, he pledged to dramatically raise student performance and do everything he could to meet the goals of a new federal law that President George W. Bush had signed only months before, called No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

Vallas's support for NCLB was generally shared by his colleagues in the nation's major cities. The Council of the Great City Schools, the umbrella organization for the city school systems, gave the measure its endorsement as the bill headed toward final approval. And large cities across the country moved rapidly to put the law into effect after it was signed.

But urban school leaders were also wary. NCLB was different from any federal education legislation they had seen before. The new law fundamentally changed the rules of the game. Public schools were being called on not only to educate all students, including those with special needs, but to teach to a standard that few other countries in the world had ever asked of their educational systems.

The law has been in place for two years now, and a number of trends, some predictable and some not, are beginning to emerge. First, NCLB is clearly