



How Parents' Perceptions of Public Schools Influence School Choice

Tiffany Amelia Farr

Faculty Advisor: Kristen Stephens, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of the Practice

Professor of Program in Education

April 2020

This project was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Graduate Liberal Studies Program in the Graduate School of Duke University.

Copyright by
Tiffany Farr
2020

ABSTRACT

This is a qualitative study regarding a rural fringe¹ school district in North Carolina. Initial interest for this study involved analyzing the State School Report Card ratings and the impact of these ratings on parental perceptions and school choice. For the purpose of this study, interviews were conducted with parents, principals, and teachers from elementary and middle schools. In North Carolina, each school's grade is calculated using student proficiency and growth data with 80% of the school grade based on student achievement and 20% on school growth as measured by the Education Value-Added Assessment System used by the state. This school grading system has become controversial among education advocates across the state, especially as research has revealed that school grades are highly correlated to family income, with schools with greater poverty scoring more Cs, Ds, and Fs than schools with less poverty. This current study examines to what extent parents use school report cards when making school choice decisions. Findings reveal that parents held very little consideration for school report cards when considering school choice decisions. The results overall showed factors such as: (a) teacher satisfaction, (b) school location, (c) school focus and philosophy, (d) availability of services, and (e) the local political climate were most influential in decisions around school choice. Parents felt these areas were better indicators of the climate within a school, and thus were the drivers of parents' school choice decisions because of how these factors may affect their child's education.

Keywords: public schools, school choice, North Carolina, perspective, parents, school performance

¹ A locale code defined by the National Center for Education Statistics which was developed using the standard of urban and rural as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. Local Classification and Criteria guide provided in Appendix A.

So, it becomes a kabuki dance. Everybody is trying to do their little bit to help everybody along the way...but then there are certain people who can do more.

- A hopeful parent

Table of Contents

Abstract	
Introduction	6
Context	4
Supporting Research and Literature Review	5
Methodology	17
Findings	44
Teachers Satisfaction.....	44
School Location.....	50
Schools Focus and Philosophy...56	
Available Services.....	69
Local Political Climate.....	81
Discussion	89
Conclusion	90
Appendices	92
References	117

How Parents' Perception of Public Schools Influences School Choice

General Statement of the Problem

When first writing the proposal for this project, I entered into this research fully expecting to analyze the North Carolina School Report Cards and how these influence the school choice decisions of parents.² This topic came to mind after I had been sitting in an education-based course at Duke University, when one of my classmates stated that he was concerned about potentially having to find another job in order to pay for his child's private school education. His child did not attend any of the state's public schools, and never has. After moving to North Carolina and researching all the school options, he stated that most public schools in the area "sucked."

A parent's concern is understandable. However, before giving public schools a chance, these parents and others are believing the narrative that all public schools are failing. In this example, the public school system has lost yet another student. I wanted to investigate the public education system within North Carolina to address the following questions: 1) How are schools truly being evaluated by the state? and 2) How are parents interpreting the metrics and other data shared via the School Report Cards?

The current school evaluation system uses a formula based 80% on student achievement and 20% on school growth (student progress from year to year) to determine a school's grade (A to F). Student achievement is measured by state test scores (i.e., End-of-Grade or End-of-Course exams). The report card formula does not consider other school variables such as percent of students on free and/or reduced lunch, percent of students who are English language learners, or other demographic and contextual information that may contribute to inequities between schools.

² The definition of parents within this study includes legal guardians and caregivers.

Interpretation of school rating data without a full contextual understanding does not always provide an objective conclusion.

This project began with the assumption that school report cards mattered to parents making school choice decisions. My hypothesis was that the general public, including parents, may be led to believe that most public schools in the state are failing their K-12 students. To test this hypothesis, I conducted a study of 107 parents whose children attend or have attended North Carolina public schools. Twenty-nine responses came from in-person and phone interviews, and 78 came from survey respondents.

However, I discovered that the majority of the parents who participated in this study did not care at all about school report card grades, or at least not in their entirety. This led me to adjust the focus of this project to the question “How are parents making school choice decisions?” And, more specifically, do people perceive the public schools as failing because of parent word of mouth spreading within local communities? I discovered that, while report card grades were not the sole source of negative perceptions, most of the participants in my survey thought the state’s public education system was not getting the job done.

Significance of the Study

With my research, I wanted to find out how parent perspectives of public schools are shaped, if not based on report card grades. The 107 parent participants mentioned, as sources for their evaluation of their public schools, re-districting, the public good, re-segregation, standardized testing, Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), inadequate school funding, lack of teacher respect, debacles with school administrators, county scandals, and issues with state legislators, among other areas. There is so much going on within the state’s education system—whether one aligns with traditional public schools, magnet schools, private schools, or charters

(respect to my two participants who stood by their school choice). Yet while much is happening, parents seem to believe that little is being done to address the challenges. As a researcher, this made me question the gap between current issues and the varying parent perspectives. To understand the gap, I focused on collecting parents', teachers', and administrators' voices.

My school research took place within a rural fringe³ school district in North Carolina. Four different schools with varying school report card ratings participated—two elementary and two middle schools. I asked school representatives such as principals, other administrators, and teachers what they considered to be the most pressing issues within the public education system. Everyone had experience and history that shaped their understanding about the current system. There were even differing opinions amongst teachers and administrators within the same school. Multiple perspectives were shared from every side. The perspectives of the highest-level school officials to the parent who had to take his son diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder out of the public schools because he could not get resources fast enough to help his child. Schools and parents with children in North Carolina's public school system, and parents who had to get out, have one universal thing in common: They feel school choice decisions involve more than the consideration of a school report card grade. For every parent, school, and district involved in this study, here—finally—is their perspective compiled and shared. This study addresses school choice not from the viewpoint of policy makers, government officials, or high-ranking state education leaders, but from the perspective of the schools and parents. The people who have their feet on the ground. By composing this study, their perspective is not an afterthought or immaterial, but it should be considered the preamble to all public education discourse.

³ A locale code defined by the National Center for Education Statistics which was developed using the standard of urban and rural as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. Local Classification and Criteria guide provided in Appendix C.

Context

Research Question

The original research question that this study was based on has expanded beyond its initial scope. However, it is important to note what initially spurred this study: *How are public school performance rating systems interpreted by parents, and how does that interpretation influence school choice?* After exploration in this study, research and data collected shows that school performance rating systems (in particular, school report cards) are only a small factor, if any, when it comes to parents' perspective of school performance and how that determines their school choice decisions. This being said, the actual research question that emerged over the course of this study evolved into: *How does parent perspective of public school performance influence school choice decision making?*

Theoretical Framework

The qualitative nature of this study fits well with Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). SCT is rooted in observing others within the context of social interactions, experiences, and influences from outside media (Bandura, 1986). When utilizing this approach, it allows for unobtrusive observation of parents during in-person interviews and when visiting schools and witnessing principal and teacher interactions amongst each other, students, parents, etc. Also, when reviewing transcriptions of phone recordings and combing through survey results, the use of SCT may possibly explain how participants acquire knowledge that influences their view regarding public education.

Supporting Research and Literature Review

This section reviews the history of school choice in the United States; provides an overview of school choice policies and mechanisms; and discusses the social, political, and legal implications of school choice. A review of the literature was conducted using search engines such as Google Scholar and the extensive digital education databases such as Education Full Text (H. W. Wilson) and the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) using terms such as “school choice,” “parent choice,” “perspective,” and “North Carolina.” Approximately fifty articles and physical books were reviewed.

History of School Choice in the United States

School choice has always existed, though its initial formation looks vastly different than how we, as a society, depict school choice now. Today school choice typically includes traditional public schools (TPS), magnets, charters, vouchers, homeschooling, and private schools.⁴ Before the expansion of public education, one-room schoolhouses in individual towns served as the primary schooling option for families and students. Local communities incorporated taxing authorities to pay for school expenses (Garcia, 2018). As the Industrial Revolution progressed during the 18th century, rural communities often migrated into America’s urban centers (Garcia, 2018).⁵ During this 18th century time period public schools gained traction by necessity more so than the desire for parents to make a political stance between their local schoolhouses, homeschooling, or city schools.

⁴ The term school choice especially refers to the opportunity to enroll youth in public and/or private educational alternatives to traditional public schools (TPS). (Riel, Virginia, et al. “Do Magnet and Charter Schools Exacerbate or Ameliorate Inequality?”)

⁵ This forced migration lead to what we now consider traditional public schools.

For a period of time, as more families clustered in distinct locations, neighborhood public schools grew in popularity as a school option. Students' attendance in these schools was determined by boundaries based on geographic proximity. This structure of geographically assigning students to certain schools had important implications as (a) racial/ethnic composition of students attending public schools mirrored the composition of the neighborhoods in which students lived, and (b) school choice was not an education policy. Student attendance in a non-public school was not used as a tool to accomplish policy goals or education reform (Garcia, 2018). Students' school placement was determined based on geological location.

However, regulations and movements in the early 1800s and 1900s lead to the expansion of parental choice that was grounded in political intention. Compulsory education laws require children to attend a public or state-accredited private school for a certain period of time that is imposed by the government (Rainey 2016).

The Common School Movement also impacted education in a political way. The secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Public Education in the 1840s was Horace Mann, and he became a champion of establishing and advocating for the Common School Movement. Mann's Twelfth Annual Report published in 1848 argued that common schools created "citizens with the knowledge, skills, and public spirit required to maintain a republic and to protect it from the sources of faction, class, and self-interest" (Labaree, p. 384, 2011). Education was looked at as the great equalizer. In the eyes of Mann, education's greatest contribution is its commonness and its ability to draw together "all members of society into a single institution" (Labaree, p. 385, 2011).

In the 1920's, the Supreme Court case *Pierce v. Society of Sisters in Oregon* fought to strike down compulsory school law. The case was looked at as a "key precedent for religious

freedom, parental rights, and fundamental privacy” (Minow, p. 819, 2011). The decision was viewed as achieving “constitutional protection to parental choice of parochial and other private schooling” (Minow, p. 819, 2011).

These early interminglings of school choice and policy continued in response to the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954. This case was waged to desegregate public schools and is the genesis of school choice impacting public policy (Garcia, 2018). With this ruling, access to high quality schooling became a civil rights issue. The desegregation of US public schools required a fundamental change from the historical arrangement where students attended schools closest to their neighborhoods (Garcia, 2018). Desegregation would lead to breaking the geographic connection between students and their neighborhood schools. The option to attend a school outside of one’s neighborhood led to school choice options, particularly for black students, that often (but not always) gave students better educational opportunities.

The intentions of *Brown* provided a promise for a better education landscape—Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall remarked that *Brown* would mean the end of all forms of segregation “by the time the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation is observed in 1963⁶” (Marshall, 1954, p.45 as cited in Meier, 1990). Oh, how the tides turned. School districts in the south established freedom-of-choice plans that afforded students the right to attend any school in their school district of residence regardless of race as long as the state was not involved in the pupil’s selection of schooling. It appears that with this action, genuine desegregation efforts were underway. However, due to the intense social pressures, students would have to endure by attending an integrated school, most black and white students stayed within their respective, segregated schools (Garcia, 2018).

⁶ To be fair, this was Marshall’s stance before the *Brown II* decision. Where it can be argued that the concept of integrating “with all deliberate speed” was not speedy at all.

Ruby Bridges was a young girl when she experienced first-hand the intense social pressure that came with being the first black student to integrate into a local, all-white school. Bridges, later in life, stated that, “Racism is a grown-up disease and we must stop using our children to spread it” (Bridges, 2014, para. 1). A nationwide attempt to further eliminate racism and prejudice in schools came about when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* (1968) case that school districts not only had the duty to eliminate segregation policies, but they must also take affirmative steps to desegregate public schools. By the mid-1970s, schools ended freedom-of-choice plans.

Much of the above is a brief and reduced history of the public education and the school choice journey for parents across the country. Nevertheless, this research is not focused specifically on the consequences of school choice, but instead how choice is perceived by parents and schools alike. The findings of this study will reveal what factors, if any, have changed when it comes to analyzing school choice today and the influence these factors have on parent decision-making.

School Choice Policies

A monumental educational turn was to come in 1988. The former president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Albert Shanker proposed the basic structure of charter schools (Garcia, 2018) The initial concept of charter schools involved establishing new public schools that broke free of educational delivery dominated by stale lectures and same old, same old instructional models that did not allow for exploration within instructional delivery, and maintained the expectation that all students should develop at the same pace.

Under Shanker’s proposal, all charter schools could pose as educational laboratories for new styles of learning. This system was intended to stay under the control of the public school

system. Also, charters were required to be approved by local school boards.⁷ Charter schools today exist in a way that encourages competition with traditional public schools. Modern day charter schools also can be run by individuals or private organizations/networks. They are also given leniency by the state and are not held to the same level of accountability as traditional public schools (Garcia, 2018).

In 1996, the NC legislature ratified a law allowing charter schools, and this opened up a market for competition-based schooling. The first charters opened a year after the law first passed (Jackson, 2011) with the legislature limiting the number of charters statewide to 100. With the introduction of charter schools, competition was soon seen between traditional public schools and charter schools (Jackson, 2011)⁸ with regards to achievement levels and enrollment numbers. The growth of charters accelerated after 2011, when the NC legislature lifted the cap on the number of charter schools allowed.

There is little regulation surrounding charter schools (Riel, Virginia, et al. 2018), and even if attempts to impose regulations on charters are made, they are fraught with challenges for government officials (Greene & McShane, 2018). This is why some charter schools are able to get away with not being a beacon for alternative, specialized learning, but instead function as a landing zone for predominately affluent schooling.

The public good is a conflicting sentiment in education. Some consider education a public good that serves public value because more highly educated individuals are likely to increase others' productivity and to embrace the fundamental tenets of a tolerant democratic society (Carnoy, 2014). While others believe that education serves a more private benefit or

⁷ Charters are now determined at the state level.

⁸ Footnotes from this article have excerpts from conversations, with officials from the office of charter schools at the state board of education, from 2011 stating that: "relationship between charter schools and the surrounding TPS is generally contentious." (Jackson, C. Kirabo. "School Competition and Teacher Labor Markets")

good. In the conception of private good, private good enhances the capacity of individuals to gain economic and social benefits from education because of the skills attained through being educated (Carnoy, 2014). However, according to the classic definition (Samuelson, 1954)⁹ a public good is characterized by nonrivalrous consumption. Simply put, education is meant to be a good for everyone uninhibited by rivalry amongst individual schools within the community or between sectors (public versus privatized).

So far, I have focused on state and federal policy enactments. However, as further laws and policies urged states and locales to hurry along the desegregation process, the resistant state of North Carolina became craftier at digging its heels in against the desegregation process. Desegregation is often depicted as a long saga, but instead should be viewed as “an unreliable car: It took forever to warm up, ran well for a brief period, and then sputtered and eventually died” (Ryan, 2010, p. 59). North Carolina did not easily succumb to desegregation after the *Brown v. Board of Education*¹⁰ ruling (Riel, Parcel, Mickelson, & Smith, 2018). At the beginning of the nationwide integration efforts of the 1950s, the Pearsall Committee was set in place in 1956 to halt desegregation progress throughout North Carolina (Momodu, 2016).

The twelve white and three black members on the committee believed that integration of public schools should not be attempted and tried to delay desegregation using as many tactics as possible. Tactics included establishing a legislative act known as the *Pupil Assignment Act*. This act gave school administrators power over student assignments. Also, under this newly written law, an amendment was included that excused students who might have to attend a court-ordered integrated public school (Momodu, 2016). White students were able to escape with their white

⁹ Samuelson’s definition provided in the Carnoy’s article in the introduction.

¹⁰ Strong response was enacted on the part of the state of North Carolina after the *Brown II* mandate that states across the country were to desegregate their schools “with all deliberate speed.”

flight wings into private schools or non-integrated schools that appeased their parents. The state did not overtly rely on racist defiance but used legal maneuvers (Campbell, 2006) to ensure that white students were sheltered from the harsh realities of a diverse school system as white parents preferred to send their children to white majority schools.

Yet, as in other Southern states, this resistance to integration only worked for North Carolina until the 1970s. North Carolina then had to yield to statewide intervention by the federal government and public school policies changed. However, a significant development later occurred for North Carolina. After overseeing state integration efforts for a number of years, the federal government removed itself from the matter in the 1990s and early 2000s when those districts being monitored under court orders appeared to be “unitary” by the federal government’s standard. This returned all responsibility back to the state to monitor and hold itself accountable for the equitable allotment of resources, funding, and maintenance of all public schools (Campbell, 2006).

For whom much has been given, much is demanded. Over the years, school choice options have grown throughout the state of North Carolina. School choice provides parents a certain level of control over their child’s education. Given the booming pervasiveness of school choice throughout the state today, it is unclear whether the state government has taken on keeping *all* schools integrated, well-funded, and equitable. As seen before in history, school choice has its drawbacks.

For example, some families do not have many “choices.” They are limited to free public school options because their assigned schools are the only place where they can feasibly send their children due to transportation issues and the availability of free and reduced lunch

programs.¹¹ These are the realities for some families experiencing socioeconomic hardships, while other families have a broader range of choice with the inclusion of private, tuition-based schools as they are not limited by cost, location, and nutrition issues. Advocates for education equity have raised concerns about how expanding school choice policies may be contributing to the re-segregation of schools in the state, not only with regards to race, but also socioeconomic status.

Social, Political, and Legal Implications of School Choice

Researchers Dana Dorsey and Gwen Roulhac explore how the 1954 school desegregation decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* paved the way for equal educational opportunities, some of which include school choice (2019). However, the authors contend that modern day school choice and privatization movements are also responsible for the social, political, and legal cycle of educational inequity. The study in the article is based on a critical race theory policy analysis that examines cyclical inequities. The analysis is focused on the state of North Carolina as it holds a complex history with school desegregation, and also currently has a high influx of school choice options. The findings of the study ultimately confirm the initial hypothesis that education policies and laws that seemingly push for educational equity regress to policies that in turn support White privilege, and maintain the status quo already set in place by society. The study is based in North Carolina, but the researchers concede that this study demonstrates a broader problem that affects public schools all across America.

After reviewing literature that suggests some educational policies lend themselves to supporting White privilege, these questions emerge from another study: (a) Do parents really

¹¹ Free and reduced lunch is not provided at every school, such is the case at charter schools. Other private institutions might provide meals by using the tuition dollars parents pay to secure their child's seat at the school.

want school integration? and (b) If so, why do so many schools remain segregated? Data collected in this study composes responses from “a large-scale national survey” (Torres, Weissbourd, p. 8, 2020) completed by US adults, and also interviews conducted “from a wide array of parents” (p.2). Interviews were conducted mainly with middle-upper class parents with the assumption that middle-upper class parents tend to have more flexibility in school choice than economically disadvantaged parents, who often cannot afford to enroll their children in tuition-based schools. Findings of the study indicate that parents of all backgrounds agreed that “racial and economic integration [is] important,” (p. 9) and parents stated that they “would prefer that their children attend schools that are substantially integrated” (p. 9) both racially and economically. However, words do not appear to match the actions. Research on a “color-blind” choice metrics—a system given to parents to determine their school choice decisions when not encouraged to pursue integration—determined most parents chose schools segregated by their self-identified demographics.

Schools can become separated by demographic because of parent choice, but school segregation can also continue for those who do not have the means to attend certain schools. Researcher Betheny Gross (2019) studies how transportation poses a barrier for parents when considering school choice. Families who want to take the school-choice route encounter the roadblock of getting their children to and from school. This study analyzed students’ school choices and travel within five major cities: Denver, Detroit, New Orleans, New York and Washington DC. Findings show that students in these cities do take advantage of school choice, because of the important academic benefits they receive, but travel, for them, comes at a cost. In these cities, the education system is deemed to reveal conditions of unequal access for all students. The article concludes that in order for choice to be worthwhile, “the payoff has to

outweigh the drawbacks” (p. 1). The cost of transportation must be sustainable for students to keep attending academically advantageous schools.

Advantageous schools also need to provide more than transportation. They should also include means for a well-rounded education. This includes a spectrum of subject areas, the arts and humanities as well as more scientific and technical subject areas. This leads one to consider Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) programs and how they can transform into STEAM¹² programs to provide a higher, more inclusive quality of education.

Characteristics of quality STEM programs (no “A” included) are outlined below (Jolly, 2014).¹³

1. The context is motivating, engaging, and real-world.
2. Students integrate and apply meaningful and important mathematics and science content.
3. Teaching methods are inquiry-based and student-centered.
4. Students engage in solving engineering challenges using an engineering design process.
5. Teamwork and communications are a major focus. Throughout programs students have the freedom to think critically, creatively, and innovatively, as well as opportunities to fail and try again in safe environments.

The arts by themselves are rooted in inquiry-based work and are a learning tool for exploring opportunities of communication and expression. However, when the arts make itself known within STEAM it can lead to new breakthroughs. Proponents believe that the arts combined with STEM help with the creation of project designs where problems are viewed as the “difference between things as desired and things as perceived” (Gause, 1989, p.50). In this meaning, mistakes are another roadmap to learning instead of failures, an emphasis often made when creating works of art can apply to STEM. According to

¹² The “A” stands for Arts.

¹³ Summarized characteristics provided by Education Week Teacher article “STEM vs. STEAM: Do the Arts Belong?” is an important article when addressing if the Arts are actually being represented when considering the addition of A within the concept of STEAM. (Jolly 2014)

Dym, Wesner, & Winner (2003) problem framing engineering designs can lead to “a potential path to get to the *spiritual* side, the *soul* side, and raise ethical concerns” (p. 106) within the field of STEM.

In simpler terms, some proponents of STEAM based learning state that STEM and the arts and humanities are intertwined. Those proponents state that STEM lessons naturally involve the arts and humanities such as language arts (communication), social studies and history (setting the context for engineering challenges), and art itself (product design).¹⁴ The students who participate in these types of programs allegedly gain access to the “affective, connected, and deeply human side” (Sochacka, 2016, p.25) of technical problems.

There is much demand over what schools should be able to provide, and how school choice manifests in different ways. Multiple school choice policies weave together and produce pressure for traditional public schools. Researchers Jennifer Holme, Rian Carkhum, and Virginia Rangel explore the notion that school choice is incited by multiple factors that influence competitiveness among schools in different ways (2012). They argue that charter schools, for instance, are more likely to put “relatively more pressure on the domains of responsiveness and innovation” (p. 172), as traditional public schools are forced to become more innovative in their approach to match the offerings of charters. However, parents looking at standards and accountability metrics may view traditional public schools as failing if they have low test scores. This would create pressure for traditional public schools to raise test scores.

After setting up a theoretical framework, Holme, Carkhum, and Rangel (2012) follow two traditional public schools in a “high pressure/high choice” urban school cluster in Texas that has responded to “a number of overlapping choice policies that have caused them to lose

¹⁴ Ibid.

significant numbers of students” (p. 168). The findings illustrate that competition does not always lead to productive change as traditional public schools are competing against multiple factors at once and struggling to keep up in different competitive ways.

Whether adequate transportation options like school buses or in-school resources such as counselors the allocation of educational resources is often overlooked and underdeveloped. In particular counselors, psychologists, and social workers struggle with their distribution within schools. Data was collected from all North Carolina public schools in 2007-2008 through the 2015-2016 school years. Researchers Kevin C. Bastian, Patrick Akos, Thurston Domina, and Megan Griffard (2019) conducted a study in which they (a) examined how support personnel are allocated, (b) tracked support personnel ratios, and (c) analyzed any secular changes involved in personnel fluctuation during a period in which state budgetary provisions contracted and expanded. The researchers also studied the distribution of support personnel to high-poverty and high-minority schools. The findings show that trends in support personnel ratio differ across school levels. Districts concentrate support personnel in high-need schools, but “this compensatory pattern is narrowing over time” (p. 2).

The articles highlighted in this section were selected because they address (a) the historical evolution of school choice since *Brown v. Board of Education*, (b) factors affecting choice, and (c) limitations of choice. These articles touch key themes that emerge in my work and through their usage I am able to find some similarities between previous research and my own, but the articles also reveal how my research provides a new perspective within the canon of school choice.

Methodology

This section provides an overview of the methods used to format this study. Participants are described in depth, instruments used are explained, and procedures are outlined. The use of this section provides a roadmap for future researchers who may want to expand upon the research presented within this paper.

Parent Participants

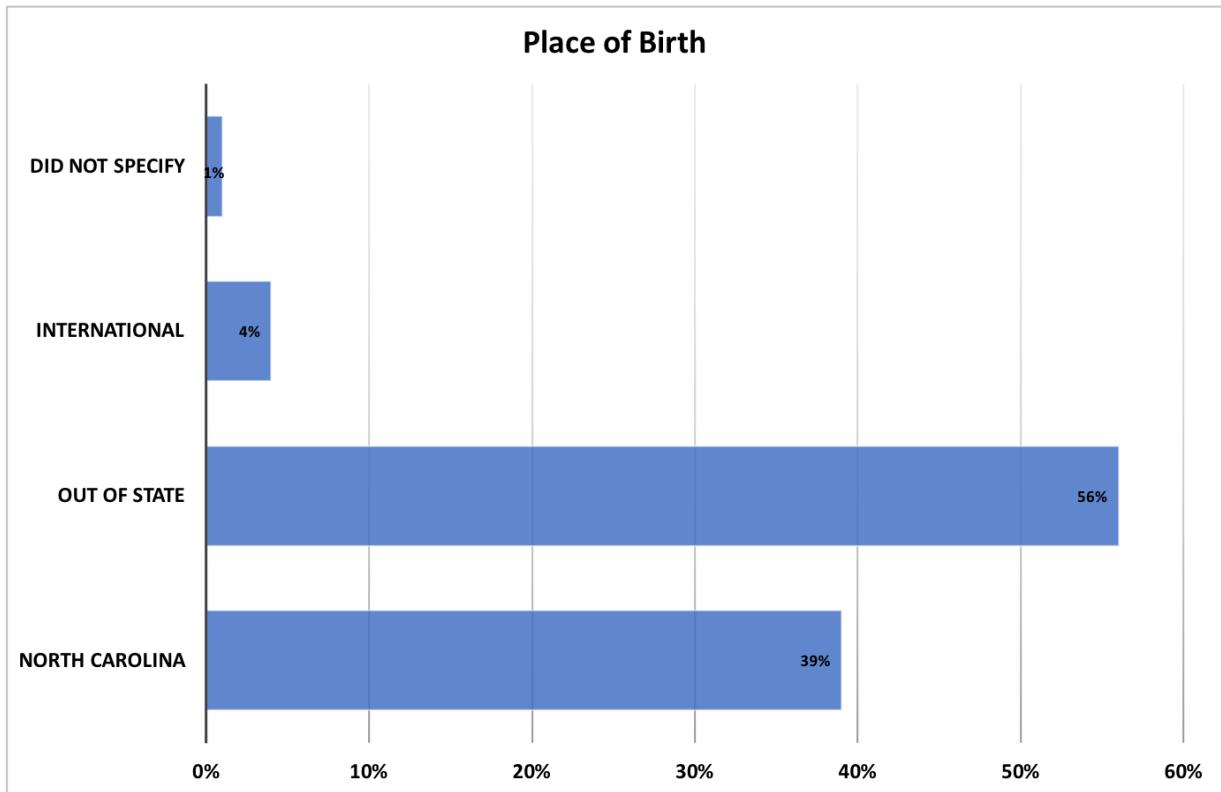
In total 107 parent perspectives were gained: 29 parents participated in a mix of in-person and phone interviews and 78 parents responded to an online survey. The experience of speaking with interviewees and collecting responses through survey was similar in many ways, but also had divergent moments.

Research data from parents was collected over a two-and-a-half week period. Parent participants were found through word of mouth, community groups, Parent Teacher Associations, Facebook groups that focused on issues such as public education and school choice, people of color (POC) groups, and children with disabilities parent groups.

Before entering in spaces, community groups, or private social media pages, permission was always sought and granted by group leaders or administrators, with the full understanding of the purpose for the study.

Parent participants had to meet two criteria: They had to be a (a) a current North Carolina resident, and (b) a parent or guardian of a current public school student. Preference was given to parents with children in grades K-8, as the school portion of this study involved elementary and middle schools. Significant points of interest did come from analyzing the demographics of participants. The data represented below is still accurate in its total portrayal. Options excluded from the graphs held no value to the overall totals.

Figure 1
Parent Place of Birth: Combined interview and survey results



Of the 107 parents, only 39% of the participants are originally from North Carolina (see Figure 1). The fact that over half of the participants were originally from out-of-state was taken into consideration when analyzing responses. Only three interview participants born out-of-state described moving to North Carolina at a young age. When asked to elaborate on their place of birth, these three participants stated they moved to/resided in North Carolina at an age in which their attendance as a student within the North Carolina education system was likely. Two out of the three participants moved to North Carolina at age 10 and were raised in North Carolina. The third participant was 3 years old when relocating to North Carolina. Another participant, apart from the three, had a military family and described moving from Tucson, Arizona to Japan then Virginia until the family finally settled in North Carolina. From this description, it is not clear at

what age the move to North Carolina was made, and if it was at an age to experience the North Carolina school system.

Opportunity for place of birth elaboration was only given to interviewees. Participants who contributed through the survey just stated place of birth and were not asked to elaborate on any possible distinctions between place of birth and where they were raised during their school-age years.

Figure 2

Parent Gender: Combined interview and survey results

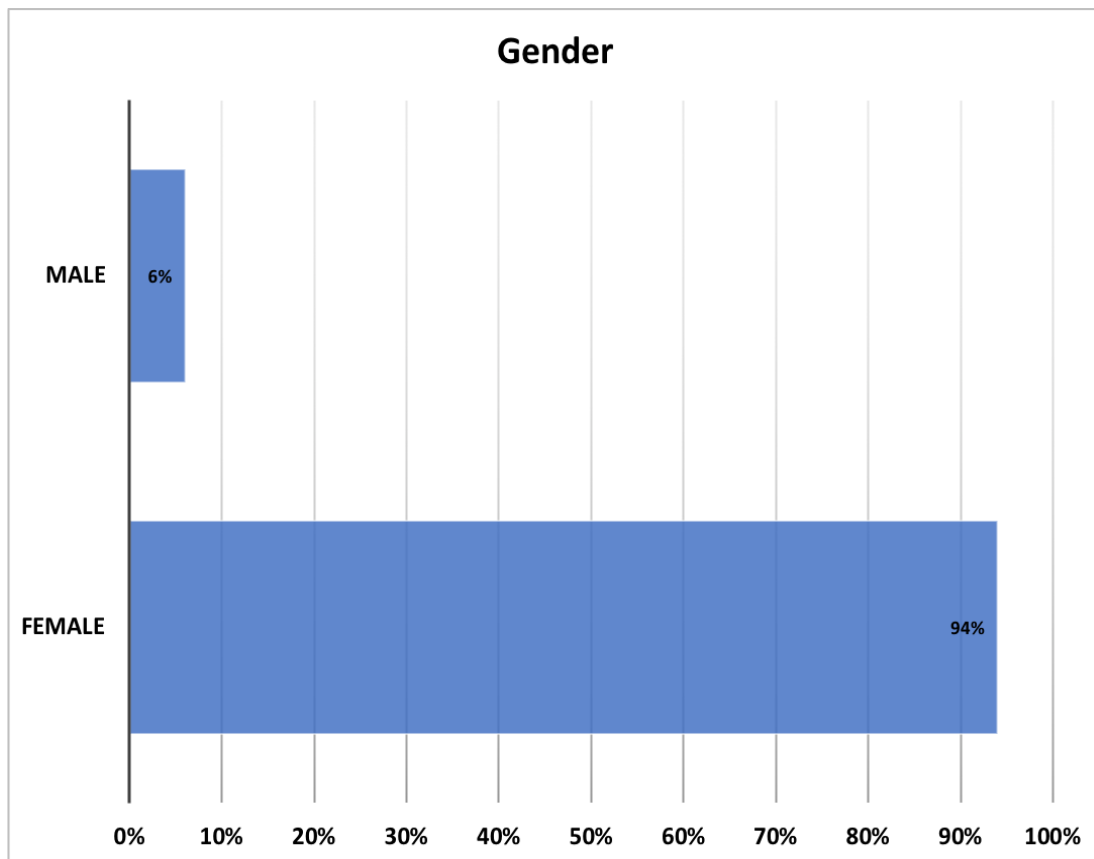


Figure 2 illustrates the skewed gender response of 94% female to 6% male. Out of all 107 respondents, six were male identifying. Of these six males, three were survey participants and three were interviewees. Opportunities to specify gender identity were offered in both the interview and online survey, with the online survey having several options for gender identification:

- Male
- Female
- Transsexual
- Other (with option to elaborate)
- Do not wish to specify.

Survey results show responses from male- and female-identifying participants only. The responses received are also reviewed with the understanding that participants may not feel comfortable sharing gender identity, even when responding to an anonymous survey.

In terms of interviewee responses, whether over the phone or during in-person interviews participants were asked to share “the gender [they] identify with.” The phrasing of the question was posed intentionally and was consistently phrased with each participant. Also, participants were told before collecting all demographic information that one could choose not to answer any of the posed questions. Responses to the gender question were provided by all participants (survey and interviewees).

Though the perspectives of mothers make up the bulk of this study, avenues were taken to post, share, and spread the message about the study to all parents, by different means, throughout the state of North Carolina. Yet participants that came forward for participation were majority females who are married (See Appendix B).

Figure 3
Parent Education Level: Combined interview and survey results

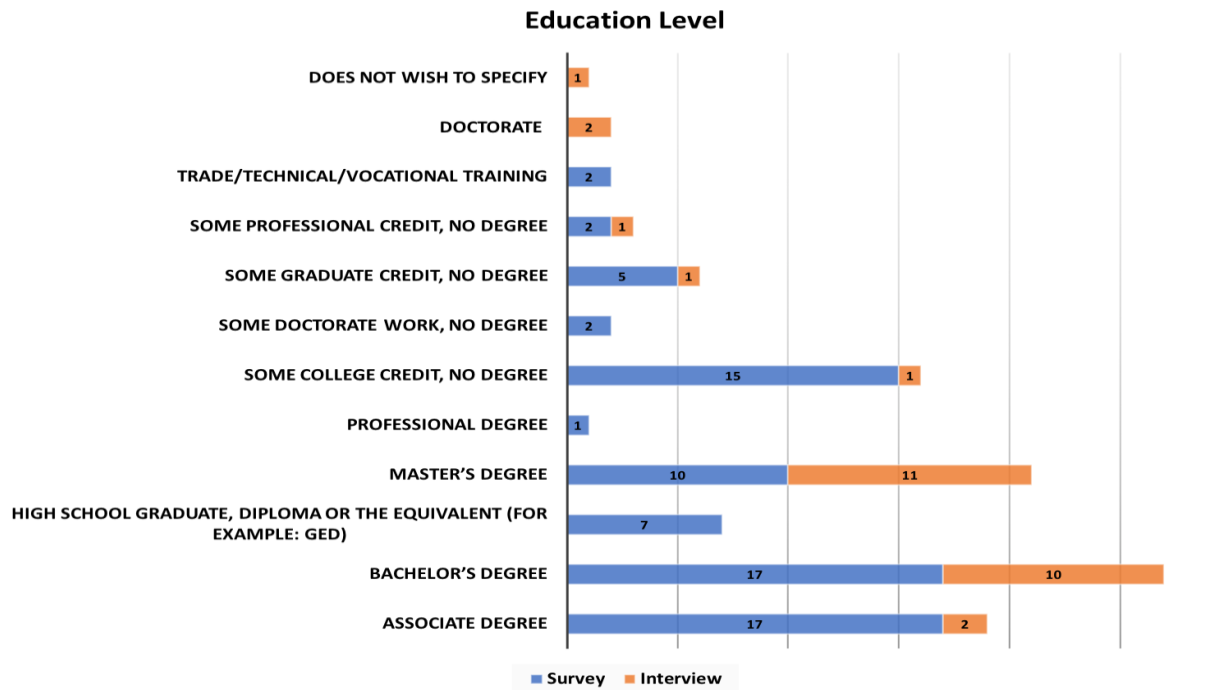


Figure 3 details the education levels of parent participants. Roughly 41% of parent participants had an associate degree or below (44 parents). The highest number of participants (27) held a bachelor’s degree. Out of those with bachelor’s degrees, approximately 62.9% participated by survey and 37% by interview. By these numbers, when considering the educational attainment level of participants, responses were reported from a diverse demographic of parents. Educational attainment may also correspond with presented opportunities for participants, and their access to educational resources.

Eligible parent participants were required to have children currently enrolled within the state’s public education system, and ideally children between kindergarten and eighth grade. However, a few outliers were included: (a) those with children in high school, (b) parents who had children in the public education system for a substantial period of time, but who removed

their children from a public school because of specific barriers presented. These situations were rare within this study. During the collection process, some parents shared information regarding all of their children, including high school graduates and beyond, or also had children who were too young for this study. For the purpose of this study, information on children outside of PreK-12 were excluded from the tables in this paper—the exception being one recent high school graduate. See Tables C1-C5 in Appendix C for these data.

The largest percentage of parents (48%) by age group in this study are between 35-44 years of age¹⁵ (See Figure 4). The youngest parent age for a 3rd grader is 38 years of age, and the highest parent age for a 3rd grader is 45 years of age. Considering the typical child age that corresponds with 3rd grade is shown to be 8-9 years old (within this study), it stands to reason that this bracket of parents had their children between the ages of 29-36 years old. United States data from the National Center for Health Statistics show that the 2018 mean age of first birth for mothers is 26.9 years of age (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). All of this to say, the numbers are believed to be fair and truly representative of the age range for parents of 3rd graders.

¹⁵ This number includes interviewees and survey participants as both respondents were asked their age.

Figure 4
Parent Age: combined interview and survey results

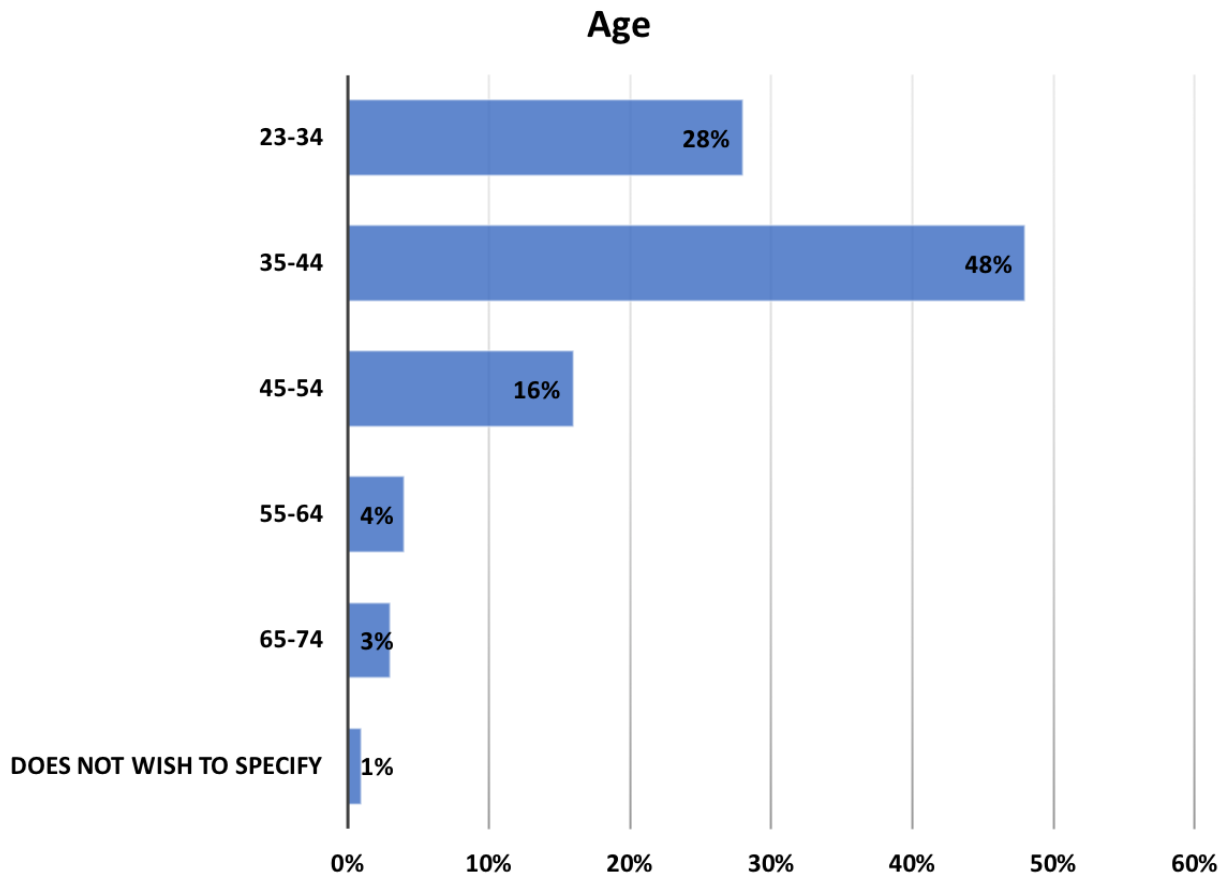
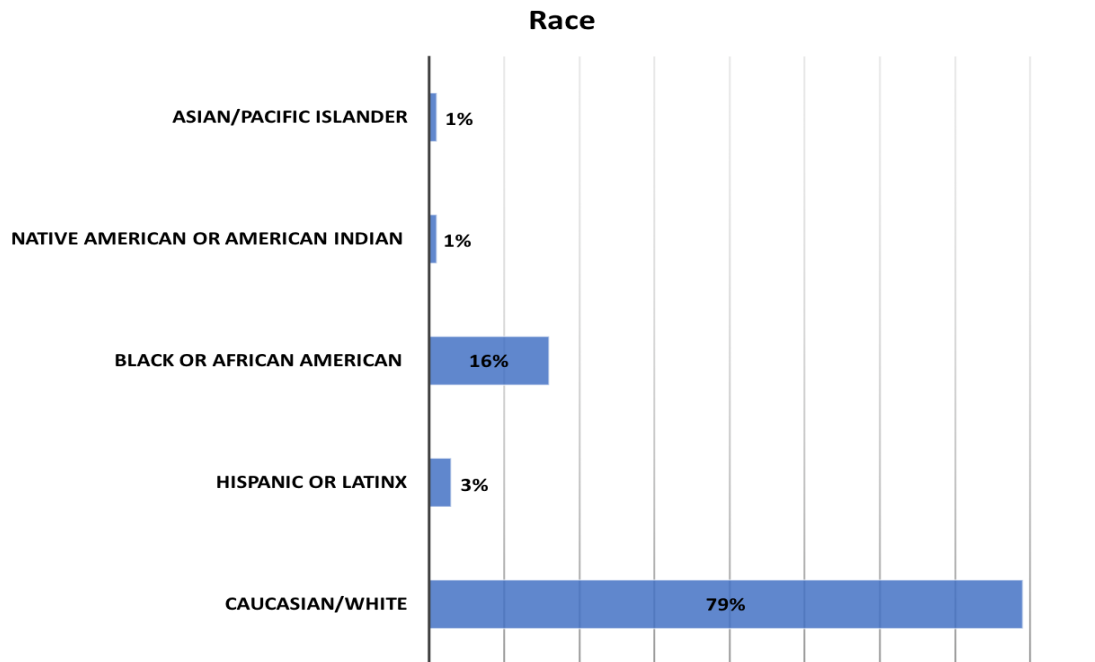


Figure 5 reveals the ethnic makeup of parent participants and is reflective of the demographics within the state as a whole. According to the numbers of the United States Census Bureau (2019), the White/Caucasian population in North Carolina makes up 70.6% of the population with Black/African American comprising 22.2%. The American Indian/Native American participation percentage (1%) is close to the state census data as well as 1.6% of North Carolina's population identifies as American Indian/Native American. However, Hispanic/Latinx participation in this study (3%) is less comparable to state data (9.6%). This being said, the

Asian/Pacific Islander participation in this study is 1%, which is only slightly less than the 1.65% of this ethnic group that reside within North Carolina.

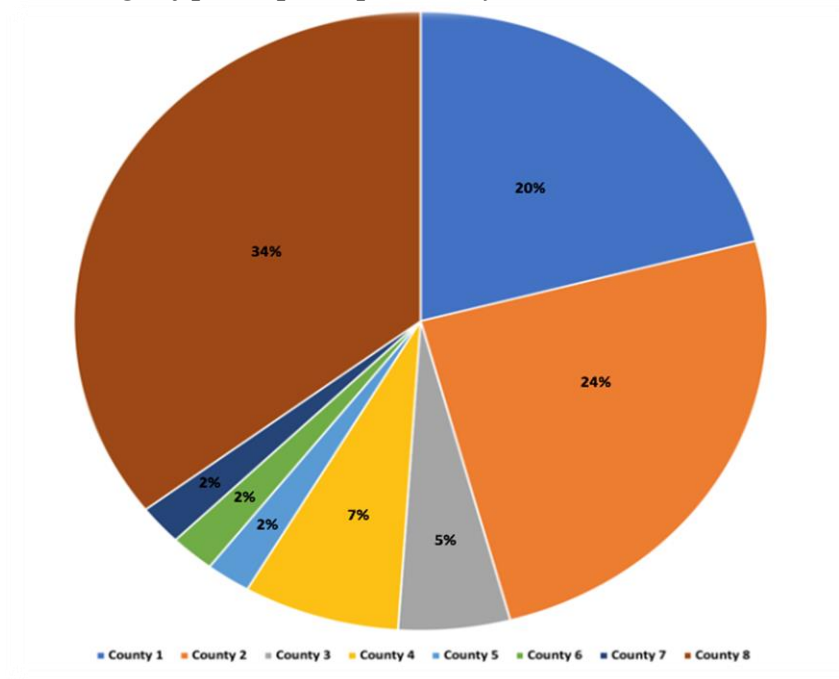
Figure 5
Parent Ethnicity: Combined interview and survey results



Parent participants were not all from the school district visited¹⁶. Out of the aggregated number of participants—interviewees and survey respondents—38% identified their county of residence. Over half of the participants opted not to indicate, but from those that did, eight different counties were represented in this study. Figure 6 further details the breakdown across the eight districts/counties represented among participants.

¹⁶ See Appendix E for templates used for county recruitment.

Figure 6
Percentage of participants per county



Approximately 34% of the parents represented districts/schools inside of the research site (County 8), and though that is the largest single percentage, in total 66% of participants lived outside of the research site. Important demographic information can be studied from all eight counties to gain further understanding of potential county barriers that participants endure, and thus give an understanding of what might shape their perspective of public schools. Table 1 represents income ranges between the eight counties as reported in the US Census (2019).

Table 1
Annual income level per county

Group	Answer	%	County
1	Less than \$25,000	0%	0
2	\$25,000-\$49,999	25%	C4, C8
3	\$50,000-\$75,000	63%	C2, C3, C5, C6, C7
4	\$76,000-\$99,999	13%	C1
5	\$100,000 or greater	0%	0
	Total		8

***Note: Average annual income in the state of North Carolina is \$52, 413 (U.S. Census, 2019).**

***Note: Average annual income for the county researched in this study is \$42,192 (U.S. Census, 2019).**

The majority of counties within this study make an annual income that coincides with the state average. There are five counties where the average resident makes between \$50,000-\$75,000 per year. The number of counties making the average salary might seem hopeful. The numbers might suggest that participants throughout numerous counties involved in this study¹⁷ are speaking from a financially neutral place when discussing school issues and concerns. This could lead to assertions that participants have school choice opinions not rooted in financial hardships but based on other insinuating factors¹⁸. Therefore, the numbers represented in Table 1 reveal only a partial picture.

Most counties are listed as making the average income that is standard in North Carolina, but the number of participants within each county must be taken into consideration. When

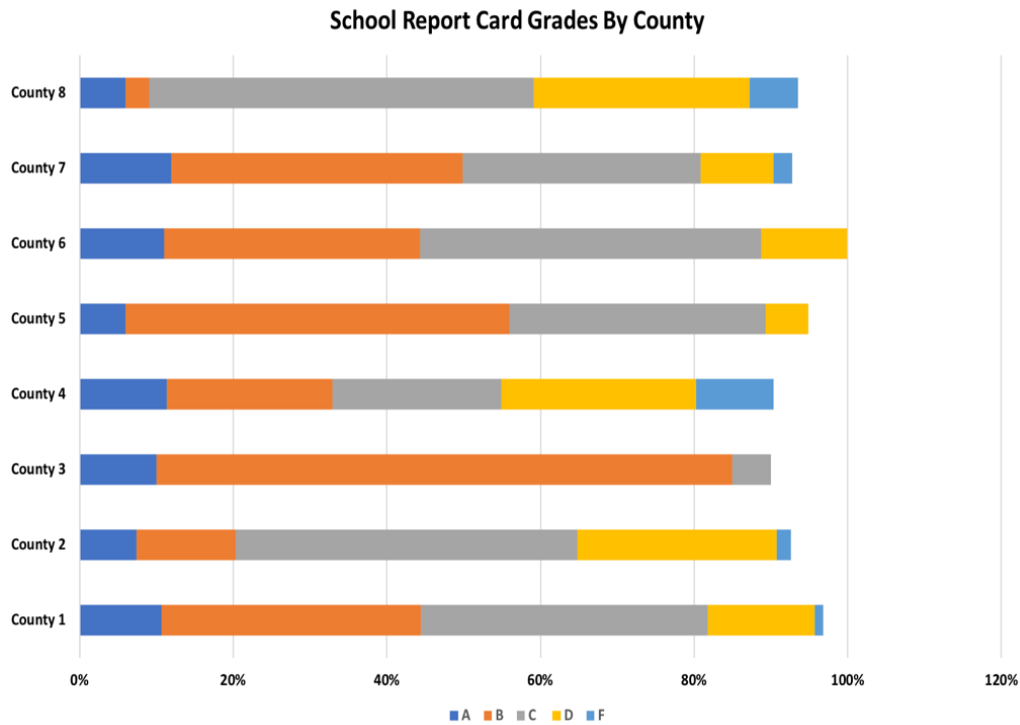
¹⁷ Well, at least the 38% that indicated their location.

¹⁸ Removing the consideration that financial hardship is a factor is important because it potentially eliminates school choice opinions being based on travel restrictions, resource lack, high afterschool program costs, etc. For participants to be in the average salary range does not guarantee a lack of financial hardship, and does not disregard county specific anomalies, but it could indicate that the average number of residents have income within their means to handle different financial barriers more readily.

reviewing Figure 6, 34% of participants were from County 8 (the study site) and 7% of participants resided in County 4. In total, participants in both of these counties make up 41% of study participants, though they are the only two counties within the \$25,000-\$49,999 income bracket. Also, County 1 which has the second highest representation in this study at 24% is the income outlier. In this county the average resident income is \$76,000-\$99,999. It is important to note that the five counties¹⁹ that represent the same income bracket (See Table 1), represent only 31% of all study participants—while the county with the highest number of participants resides in the lowest income bracket for participants. The trend in income also tracks when reviewing county demographics in relationship with school report card grades.

¹⁹ County 2, County 3, County 5, County 6, and County 7

Figure 7
School report card grades per county²⁰



Counties 4 and 8 (study site) have the highest numbers of D and F rated schools combined among participants. County 4 has 10% and County 8 has 6% of D schools within their counties. These percentages are high compared to the other six counties, none of which had F percentages above 2%. County 2 is an anomaly with 26% of schools receiving a D grade—advancing past County 4’s 25% of D schools. However, neither surpass County 8 where 28% of school are D-rated. School grades are calculated predominately (80%) using student achievement scores which are highly correlated to income – thus, school grades also become highly correlated to income. For this reason, high poverty schools tend to receive lower grades. If the formula to calculate school grades put more weight on growth – rather than the 20% it does – these school

²⁰ Percentages calculated by (number of schools with grade) / (total schools in the county). Percentages do not equal 100%, because each county had a different total of schools.

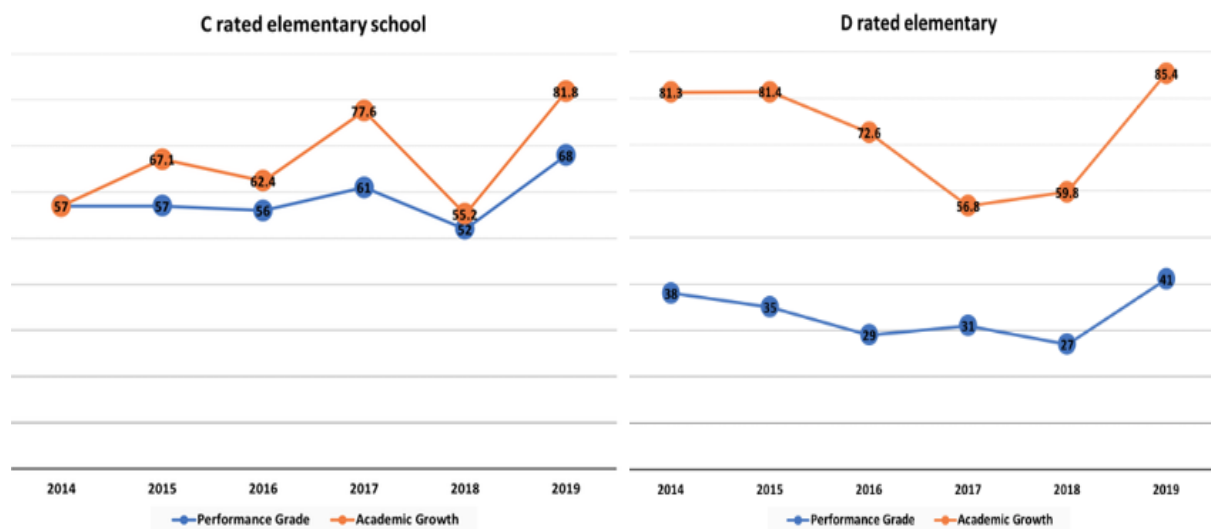
grades might look very different and maybe wouldn't correlate as strongly to income. For additional demographics of study participants see Appendix B and C.

School Participants

Figures 8-11 represent data from the four schools involved in this study. Schools might be considered undesirable based on location. Parents who live within certain areas might have expectations for what the demographics of their local schools should look like.

Figure 8 details achievement and growth data for the elementary schools involved in the study, and Figure 9 show the percentage of economically disadvantaged students at each elementary school.

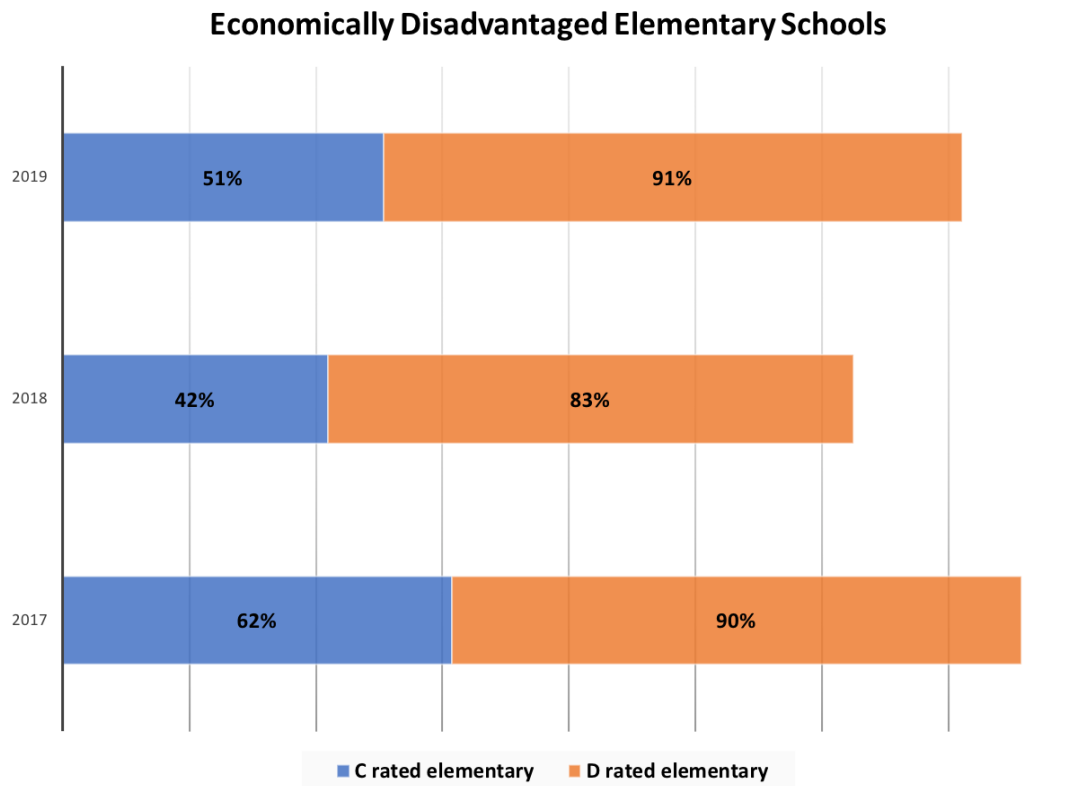
Figure 8
Elementary school performance grade compared to growth



The school in the study that would be considered less desirable is the D-rated school. It had a consistent F rating from 2014-2018. It only secured a D rating for the first time last year (2019). The performance grade is the visible factor when reviewing school report cards. It is not

until a participant selects the school report that they can analyze the growth rates for each year. As consistently as the D- and F-rated school had a low performance grade, they outranked the C-rated school in terms of growth each year, the only exception being the 2017 school year.

Figure 9
Graph of economic disadvantage between high and low rank elementary school



The reported percentages of economically disadvantaged students at the D-rated school, over the course of three years, averaged around 88%. The school, unfortunately, has the double-whammy of not only being lower rated, but parents potentially being able to justify the low ratings based on the demographics of students in attendance. However, the demographics of students in the D-rated elementary school are also tied to location (which also correlates with

income). In the area where the D-rated elementary school is located the population is predominately African-American. There is one elementary school (student population 88% black) in the area, and that is the school included in this study. There is also one middle school that has 83% black students, and one high school that has 86% black students (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Statistical Profile, 2020).

Figure 10 and 11 present achievement and demographic information for the middle schools involved in the study.

Figure 10

Middle school performance grade compared to growth

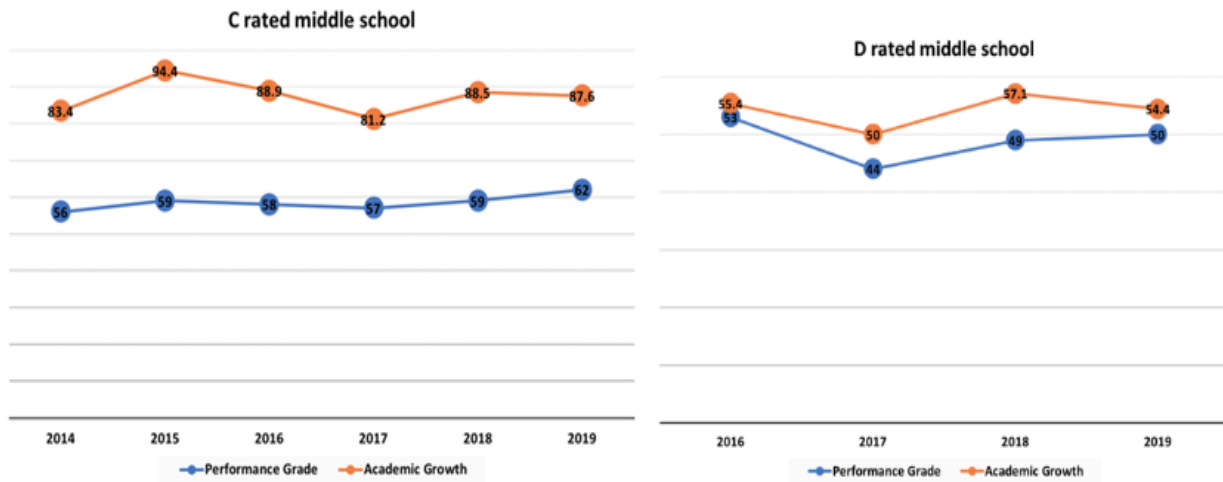
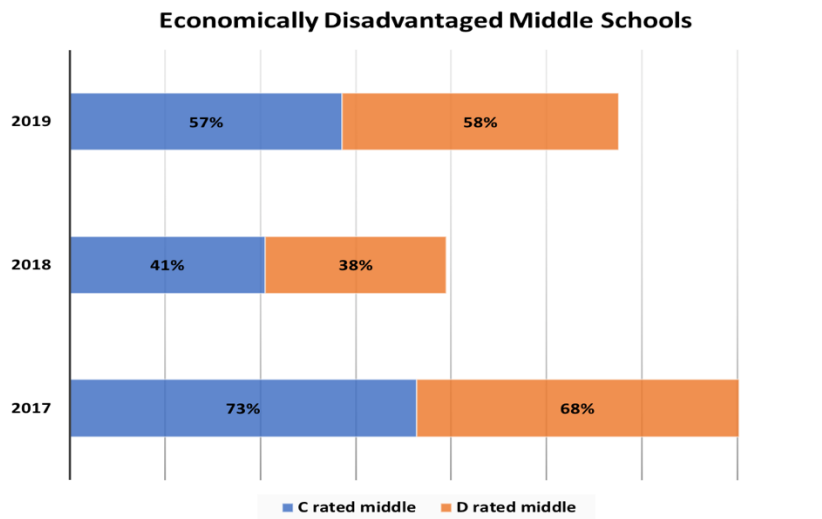


Figure 11
Graph of economic disadvantage between high and low rank middle school



The two middle schools in this study represent a situation that disproves the reliability of correlating demographics and school grades. The higher performing school has a higher economically disadvantaged student population. However, they produce the higher school report card scores throughout the 2014-2019 years. The principal of the higher-rated school attributes their success to military families who bring more student enrollment into the area. However, the lower-rated middle school principal reports that the school is located in the most rural part of the county. They have their chicken farm. They have their one stop light. They have a school that has little resources, and thus (re)produces underperforming status within the community. More than anything, no one wants to go to one of *those* schools.

Materials

A small journal was used to record general demographic information, preliminary questions, and notes regarding participant responses from in-person and phone interviews. The Notes application was also used on a MacBook laptop for speedier notetaking during certain in-

person or phone interviews. Participants were made aware beforehand of this notetaking and consented to the process.

All in-person and phone interviews were recorded for later transcribing via a smartphone recording application. All participants consented to being recorded, including participants within the school portion of this study (principals, teachers).

Instruments

Two data collection instruments were used for parent participation: Interviews and surveys. Under the category of interviews there were both in-person and phone interviews. Table 2 represents questions asked of interviewees compared to questions posed in the survey²¹.

Table 2
Parent Survey and Interview Questions

Question	Interview	Survey
Place of Birth	✓	✓
Gender	✓	✓
Education Level	✓	✓
Age	✓	✓
Race	✓	✓
Race of Children	✓	
Marital Status	✓	✓
Model of Public School	✓	
“Do you know about the North Carolina School Report Card?”	✓	✓

²¹ It should be noted that the survey was dispensed before interviews were conducted, and once released no questions were changed in order to keep results accurate for every survey participant. Also, when conducting interviews more questions emerged besides the ones noted above, but for comparability the most similar questions above are included from the interviewee portion of this study.

“Do you know the rating of your child(s) school?”	✓	✓
“Are report cards reflective of a school’s performance?”	✓	✓
“What advice would you give school leaders and/or policy makers of North Carolina public schools?”	✓	✓
“Are you the parent, legal guardian, or caregiver of a current K-12 student?”		✓
“Is this student in a recognized North Carolina Public School?”		✓
“How much does it cost you for your child(s) to attend their current school?”		✓
“By your understanding, what are the main components that determines the letter grade for the schools?”		✓
“What are the main components that determines the school choice decision you make for your child/dependent?”		✓
“Do you have suggestions for other criteria that should go into determining School Report Card ratings?”		✓
“What is working right or well in the North Carolina public school system?”	✓	
“What has changed in the state’s school system in the last decade?”	✓	
“What overall issue will the state’s public-school system be held accountable for in the next few years?”	✓	
“What else can be done?”	✓	
“What makes you the proudest of your child and their journey through the education system?”	✓	

The original research goal was to have the majority of interviews be in-person. The in-person interviews made it easier to employ SCT during the process; however, travel time and fuel costs limited in-person interviews, and I had to conduct parent interviews almost exclusively over the phone toward the later end of the data collection process. During the semi-structured interview process, after preliminary and before end of interview questions, the only additional questions asked during the course of the interviews involved seeking more detail and/or elaboration around specific comments made by participants.

The survey (Appendix D) was created using Qualtrics survey software. Responses to the survey stalled at around five to seven completions for a significant period during active data collection; however, after the survey link was shared between different social groups beyond my initial reach, a final total of 78 survey responses were received.

Twenty-one questions were asked within the general logic flow of the survey. Survey participants sometimes experienced additional questions based on responses to previous answers within the survey. Condition commands such as “If yes is selected go to..” guided survey respondents to answer more questions outside of the 21. There were 7 open-ended questions that required participants to type their responses in a text box and allowed for elaboration.

The direct link to the state’s school report card website was provided for participants within the survey. From there, parents had time for exploration (if needed) before returning to the survey. The Qualtrics survey was created for participants to be able to start and stop as needed. So, the opportunity was presented to understand the school report cards more thoroughly for both interviewee and survey participants involved. Thus, interview and

survey participants had the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the school report cards.

The study also involved semi-structured interviews with parents—either by phone or in-person. Questions were designed to be open-ended and flexible for parent participants to navigate the conversation in a way that is assumed to be truthful and reliable. Initial questions collected demographic information to better understand the profile of parent participants. The following interview questions were universally asked of every parent participant²²:

Beginning of Interview

- 1) Do you know about the School Report Card rating system?
- 2) Do you know the rating of your child's school?
- 3) Are report card grades reflective of a school's performance?
- 4) What advice would you give school leaders and/or policy makers of public schools?

End of Interview

- 1) What is working right or well with the state's public education system?
- 2) What has changed in the state's school system in the last decade?
- 3) What overall issue will the state's public school system be held accountable for in the next few years?
- 4) What else can be done?
- 5) What makes you the proudest of your child and their journey through the education system?

Regarding the beginning questions: The first three questions were intended to confirm or rule out the role that school report card grades play into parental perspectives of the state's public education system. The overwhelming majority of parents responded "No" and further elaborated when answering question 3. Question 4 developed after the first interview for this study was conducted. This question was deemed necessary to include to analyze what parent participants might consider as issues within the education field in the state, if not based on school report

²² The questions listed here are repeats from the table at the beginning of the section but are included here not to compare between "Interview" and "Survey" questions, but instead to compare "Parent" questions to "School Official" questions.

cards. This not only served as information for later in the analysis, but also during the interview as a gateway into deeper discussion about each participants' area of concern and experiences.

In regard to the End-of-Interview questions, these questions were intended to narrow parent participants' focus back toward issues within the education system as a whole. During the interview process the perspective shared is understandably focused on the participant's individual story. When closing each interview, I wanted to draw participants back into giving a complete look at the education landscape within the state. Parents stated that this made them think critically about how their personal experiences influences their overall perception of the public-school system as a whole when deciding what school option is the best for their child.

While parents participated in both interviews and the survey, principal and teacher participation was limited to in-person interviews only. The qualitative approach was also used when engaging with school officials. All interviews conducted within the schools were semi-structured as well. The following questions were universally asked of every school official participant (most being principals):

- 1) How has your school been impacted by having you as their leaders?
- 2) What is working right or well with the state's public education system?
- 3) What is your School Report Card rating?
- 4) What future do you envision for your school?
- 5) Do you believe report card schools impact parent perspectives of your school?
- 6) What advice would you give other school leaders and/or policy makers of the state's public schools?
- 7) What else can be done?
- 8) What overall issue will the state public school system be held accountable for in the next few years?
- 9) What makes you the proudest of your students and their journey through the education system?

Some school official interview questions mirrored questions provided for parent participants. Those such questions were intentionally used as a means to see potential overlap in perspectives that school officials and parents might share. The joint responses from schools and

parents are what laid the foundation of this study and highlighted the connections that schools and parents have when viewing state level education issues. Questions 3 and 5 were school-specific questions to observe how principals and other school officials felt about state policies designed to hold schools and districts accountable—sometimes in ways that cannot easily be measured. Questions 1 and 4 were added to allow for a comparison of the school officials' thoughts and vision for the school with the determinations made within the school's report card.

Procedures

The study was employed using a qualitative case study methodology. Researcher Yin (1995) points out that the goal of qualitative case study research does not focus on statistical generalization but about theoretical generalization, which means to “expand our understanding of theoretical propositions and hypotheses” (p. 39). This study examines whether and under what conditions parents' perceptions of public schools influence their decision-making when considering school choice.

Parental engagement was obtained multiple ways, including by word-of-mouth. Also, connections shared with me put me in touch with two prominent Parent Teacher Association (PTA) members. One PTA representative worked throughout a whole public-school district. Another served in the PTA presidential seat for her child's magnet school. After speaking separately with both women over the phone, their interest in my research led to their assistance with gathering parent participation. For the magnet school, I was able to write a blurb about my research that was put into the school's PTA Listserv. Parents were given an email link to contact me via a Gmail account made specifically for this project, the email domain being whatparentshavetosay. See Appendix E for samples of participant and district recruitment materials.

For transparency, four participants were lost during the collection process of this research. A loss described here means an interview was scheduled and confirmed, but for different reasons, fell through. Of the four losses, two were women: (a) an in-person interview lost due to scheduling conflicts, and (b) a phone interview where the participant never responded when contacted. One male respondent was initially scheduled as an in-person interview but then he requested to be interviewed by phone. As the date approached for the phone interview, the participant ceased contact. The final participant was a male who originally had to reschedule, but when he reached out to reschedule a second time, research collection had ended.

During the interview portion of this study, preliminary questions for every participant included asking them about their knowledge regarding the school report cards, how their child's school was rated, and if they viewed the school report card system as an accurate measure and portrayal of school performance. The same questions were present in the survey, and some more elaborating questions were placed in the survey as well²³.

As the researcher, I interviewed parent participants individually. Locations for in-person interviews were coordinated to ensure the convenience of participants. Providing this environmental consideration was done to allow participants to feel like they were in a comfortable environment, and to possibly help aid in their openness during the interview. Location examples included Starbuck cafes, a Panera Bread restaurant, a meetup within an elementary school. Interviews were originally blocked off as one-hour sessions. All interviews, except two (one less than 50 minutes, another 56 minutes exactly), went over the allotted one-hour block of time. Research is considered to be fair and accurate, as all participants were given

²³ More specific, open-ended elaboration questions given in the survey, and not for preliminary questions of in-person/phone interviews, because for the quality of the study I had to ask intentional question to get needed and valuable feedback. Interviews were able to be only semi-structured because there was more space and time for full elaboration.

leeway to speak about their experiences until they felt as if all that needed to be shared was complete. In this way, no participants were cut off from discussion compared to others.

Every interview started with the demographic and preliminary (Beginning of Interview) questions. After demographic and preliminary questions were asked, the interview flowed based on the lead of the participants. This format remained the same for in-person and phone interviews. Participants were not made aware that End-of-Interview questions would be asked at the end. The interview procedure was the same for school administrators and teachers within this study.

After data was collected, interviews and survey results were compiled then coded by themes. Themes were clustered in multiple ways: by topic areas that emerged most often²⁴ or by role of participants—parents, principals, teachers. Findings were checked and rechecked for discrepancies in interpretation of analysis. Interviews were re-read and checked against coded data to ensure interpretation was consistent throughout the transcription process, and not over-reaching.

After approval was granted by Duke University's Institution Review Board (IRB) for the study, twenty-two school districts in North Carolina were contacted regarding permission to conduct this research. The majority of these requests yielded rejections, or a district didn't respond at all. Two districts initially granted permission, then retracted after considering the scope of the study. One district gave partial permission before the request was vetoed by the superintendent. In the end, three school districts remained. One gave permission, but with the request that the study be limited to high schools due to other research being conducted within elementary schools. The district ultimately selected as the site for this study gave permission for

²⁴ Teachers, Geographic Location, Schools, Services, Politics

full access, with the understanding that principal and school participation would be voluntary and at the principal's discretion (See Appendix F for the research application sent to the selected school district). The final and third district was in the process of confirming their participation, but prior to receiving their confirmation, arrangements had already been made to commence the study with another district.

In total, eight school officials' perspectives were gained: four principals (two from elementary, two from middle) and 4 educators (one from elementary, three from middle) within a single school district. When selecting schools for participation, schools were specifically targeted for either their high or low school report card score. When reviewing schools within the specific district on the North Carolina School Report Card website, there were no A- or F-rated elementary schools for the 2019 year. For this reason, elementary schools were initially contacted who had B and D ratings. Ultimately, the scope expanded to soliciting C-rated schools when trying to secure participation. The higher rated elementary school selected holds a C rating with the distinction of growth met for the 2019 year, and the lower rated elementary school holds a D with the distinction of exceeded growth.

The same process was completed for securing the two middle schools. The middle school range within the county was C-F. The higher rated middle school was a C with exceeded growth distinction, and the lower rated school held a D with growth not met. There was more flexibility for selecting teachers to participate in the study, as principals gave me the options of working with different teacher types such as: (a) higher or lower performing educators, (b) new or veteran

teachers²⁵, or (c) selection by the subject matter taught²⁶. When asked for a preference by principals, it was indicated that the higher or lower performing categorization was preferred for observation purposes.

²⁵ Teachers known as a veteran when they have been in the profession for a substantial period of time. When searching for a specific number of years some sources said 3-5, while many others said 10 years or more. The website “We Are Teachers” describes reaching veteran status as a teacher including more than number of years but other milestones such as knowing when to advocate for what you know is best in your classroom, or when a child throws up on you. Such a range of perspectives.

²⁶ During the process, I typically asked to work with teachers who are either considered lower performing or higher performing, according to the principal involved. Out of the four principals, most selected that I observe a higher performing teacher. Three out of the four teachers were math teachers. I was able to interview a Language Arts teacher in one of the schools, because the math teacher I was initially observing would not have time for an interview during my scheduled observation time.

Findings²⁷

Teachers Satisfaction

In order to understand school choice responses from participants, it is important to address key themes coded throughout the data collection process. One of these coded areas was the role of teachers in the public education system. In particular, there are three main areas that parents addressed when discussing the role of teachers throughout North Carolina's public education system.

Pay

School choice is built on the backs of educators. Throughout the data collection process, every parent participant was asked the question: "What is working right or well in the state public education system?" and teachers accounted for only 14% from the aggregated total of participants. Teachers contribute to the success of state public education. They were a driving factor even before parents had to start homeschooling their kids during the COVID-19²⁸ pandemic and realized how hard teaching can be.

From conducting the school portion of this study, I interviewed a teacher named²⁹ Ms. S, and her grievance was about the money (though she asserts that lack of decent pay *is* a lack of respect). Walking into Ms. S's 7th grade class during her planning period, she was sitting at her little corner desk, lined against the white wall. The principal told me in advance that she was a nasal-voiced woman who was a straight-shooter conversationalist. As I introduced myself to her, I noticed most her crown of gray hair and the JUUL cigarette she smoked at her desk. During our

²⁷ Multiple participant responses have been gathered, but for condensing material only the more significant quotes are included.

²⁸ 'Rona highlights not only the failing of our healthcare system, but more than ever the country's unequipped school systems.

²⁹ Initial used for all participants to protect their identity.

conversation, I found out that she was a veteran teacher. The rural fringe county that housed the middle school we were sitting in is the third county where she has taught. She shared that she has survived administrator-with-receptionist affairs, principals who have picked favorites (and she wasn't one of them), and a general lack of textbook supplies and parent involvement³⁰. After having been through it all, she still professed her love of the profession. However, she does have her concerns about the state's public education system.

Ms. S: Nobody wants to be a teacher, good God. I don't think I would be a teacher right now if I was getting into teaching right now, even though I love it. Go somewhere else, make money, get respect.

Researcher: Do you think in terms of being a teacher right now that it's about respect, or an issue of money?

Ms. S: Well, isn't respect reflected in the money?

Ms. S blew out her drag of JUUL, shrugged, and the conversation then weaved in other directions. Nevertheless, this pain point of teacher salary—lack of—is quite real.

The following quote is from a parent participant who used to work as a substitute teacher. From her own personal experience, she believes teacher do not get paid enough for having to deal with what they go through.

TKB: So, I got down and looked and [roaches] were coming from this child's backpack. So, I picked it up and mouthed to the teacher's assistant: Fuck. And, I kind of looked at the little girl and smiled. And assured her, I'm gonna go clean it up for ya [sic]. I get into the bathroom and dumped all of the roaches in the toilet and flush the toilet. She had like a gold fish shape thing, where she had brought goldfish to school. So, I rinsed it out really good. Cleaned out the backpack as best as I could and took it back and just quietly put it back down. And whispered to her, "You probably shouldn't bring that backpack to school. Make sure it's cleaned out. Don't bring it back to school until you make sure it's all clean. I don't remember exactly what it was I told her. But that type of thing teachers have to deal with.

³⁰ I appreciated Ms. S's candidness from start to finish, though I could have done without the smoke rings.

Results from this study and first hand testimony show that teachers are expected to bounce back from impromptu moments like this, even people acting as temporary substitutes. They are expected to make it work, wipe up the roaches. See Appendix G for more discussion surrounding teacher pay.

Support

There is not always a guarantee for a raise, but there is a guarantee that the lessons must carry on. Increasing teacher pay is one way to try and retain quality educators, but teachers also want what they have been lacking most in recent years—the public’s support.

“You talk to a teacher and most of the reason teachers are leaving? Pay is part of it, but it's not the biggest part of it. They want respect. They want supplies. They want support. They want support from the administration, from the district, and from the parent.”

- former educator, current parent

“The profession is hurting bad right now. And I'm sad to say this, but I would have a hard time advising someone to go into education right now...I think we need great teachers and everything, but teachers are leaving, and nobody is telling people to go into that profession anymore.”

-former teacher and principal, current homeschooling parent

“And the hours that my teacher works. She never stops working. She works. She's called. I told her, ‘When I come back, I want you to not be here.’ But she’ll probably be there.”

-first year teacher’s aide in state public school, current parent

These quotes represent parent responses from those who happen to have a background in education, but former educators were not the only participants speaking about teachers.

“Teachers and counselor psychologists are here. They would be an amazing resource to tap, to figure out what our schools really need. There are many of them who are very open and will tell you how they feel, and they should be listened to. Some parents too. But we just kind of know there's problems. We're not necessarily very good at solutions.”

-education advocate, current parent

“We had really innovative teachers. My girls have dyslexia, and they really met them where they were and helped them excel. We also did outside tutoring and programs but just the amount of effort that the teachers put into their kids was really— it still takes my breath away.”

-graduate student, current parent

Participants can view the current reality of teachers with the glass half empty or full. Either way, when analyzing school choice, paying teachers better and valuing them not only keeps them within the profession, but also eases the pressure they feel when dealing with school assessments.

Assessments

As discussed by Holme's (2012), pressure brought upon schools occurs because of competition. School choice brings competition to the education market, and this is considered valuable for most school choice supporters³¹. Schools have to prove that they are more efficient, responsive, and innovative (Holme, 2012) than other schools within the area. Public schools themselves feel this competitive pressure, but individual teachers do too. Teachers are tasked with showcasing efficiency. Educators must show increased work effort to demonstrate concise competence. The main way to measure competence statewide: Testing.

The results of student test results impact school report cards the most. Student achievement comprises 80% of the accountability model used to calculate the effectiveness

³¹ Important to note that this view does not encompass all school choice supports.

of a school. There is a reliance on the test to analyze learning outcomes and to prove if teachers successfully taught their students. Assessments³² making up the largest portion of school report card scores make the report card scores appear like the most valid measurement of school performance is student achievement. However, that is far from the truth.

In this study, participants were asked different questions about the state's report cards and school choice decision-making. Approximately 74 % of parent participants³³ indicated that they knew the report card grade of their child's school, and some participants even shared their school's name. Of the 107 parent participants, 58% stated that they did not know how school report card grades were calculated. By the measure of these percentages, the majority of participants know the school report card grade of their children's school, but they do not understand how these grades are determined³⁴.

Teachers are asked to care about assessments, and their competency is judged by the success of their students. When talking to teacher participant TE in my first school within the school portion of this study, she mentions that she tells her students this is a test about her. This is not about them. She states that she does this on purpose to ease any potential test anxiety, and so students will not feel pressured when taking Beginning-of-Grade (BOG) and End-of- Grade (EOG) exams.³⁵ She says she does this for her students' wellbeing, but at the same time, she is telling the truth about the dynamics at play in the greater educational

³² Some assessment examples include Beginning of Grade (BOG) and End of Grade (EOG) tests.

³³ Percentage from interviews and survey.

³⁴ Also, should be noted that the questions were open-ended, so any interpretation of understanding would have been valid. Asked participants to specify if they did not know.

³⁵ Tests that serve as benchmarks for student progress throughout the year. These tests are considered critical at the third-grade level, as BOG and EOG results determine if students will continue to 4th grade or be held back.

landscape of the state. Teachers are judged by these scores just as much, if not more, than the students themselves.

TE is a third-grade teacher who has been at her school for thirty years. She says she wants to retire to a beach town in two years. She says the rural county does not have much. There is a constant brain drain, and teachers are not coming into the area to teach. TE says that her husband lives two hours away in a different city, in a townhome they own. His livelihood is there. There are more opportunities. But TE began her career in the rural county, and out of loyalty she is finishing her career there. She drives the two hours every weekend to be with her husband and puts in her 7am-3pm during the week trying to prepare her students for the test.

Some educators nowadays are accused of teaching *only* for the test. For those that do, it is hard to criticize them. Education policies set in motion regarding standards and assessments have teachers and parents concerned. On the survey, when parent participants were asked if they viewed School Report Cards as an accurate portrayal of school performance, approximately 36% selected the “Definitely not” option and about 11% said “Probably not.” When asked to elaborate, 40% of respondents linked inaccurate public-school portrayals to testing. In this open-ended section of the survey, parent participants believed that tests should “not be so stressful,” because “if a child doesn’t feel like testing” they will not commit. In general, a parent participant summarized that making sure “children are able to understand” tests are crucial so they can perform better. Parents are hesitant to make school choice decisions based on school report cards since student achievement is heavily weighted (80%) on a school’s grade. Parents recognize the inherent

bias that comes with measures of assessment. Perhaps a better focus would be on reassessing the formula used that the state relies on in calculating school report card grades

If they do that, maybe schools can be rewarded for progress rather than proficiency levels.

School Location

Another key theme that emerged when coding the data was geographical location. Similar to the section regarding teachers, there are three main areas that parent participants addressed when discussing the role of location in school choice decisions and options.

Redlining

Location was the most frequently cited factor considered in school choice decisions by parents. Nearly 28% of participants expressed that the school's location played a crucial role in their school choice decisions.³⁶ Parent participants expressed wanting to feel like they lived in an area that gives them access to the best public school options, even if they decided not to attend a traditional public school. Thus, frustration was felt by participants around issues concerning redistricting, property taxes, and the lottery system, as these things were often perceived to actually limit their choices.

One in-person interview was held with a parent who came from the Midwest with her husband and three girls. Moving from Madison, Wisconsin to a new state was a culture shock for them, as they encountered a plethora of school choice options for the first time. They quickly realized though, that location matters most for their family.

³⁶ 28% is considered significant in this instance as there were only four single factor options (Location, School Resources/Programs, School Performance Grade, Word of Mouth/Reputation), and location to the highest percentage.

BR: And so, when I was interviewing for a higher education position, you know, we had to figure out where we were going to live. We didn't know anybody down here. And everybody I talked to was like move to this certain area³⁷. You know, they have great parochial schools. And so...that's what we did. We moved to that area because education is so important to me. And once we got to the area, I'm working at this university further away and trying to get the girls involved in the institution. So, they are coming to seminars. They're going to the history museum. We're going to gardens. We're in downtown at those museums. So, we're doing all of our life things in this other area. So, it didn't make sense to me that we didn't live in the area where I worked.

The family ultimately ended up moving closer to the parent's work. Their housing options were restricted to homes that provided wheelchair access for her husband. Before moving from Wisconsin, BR's daughters attended Catholic schools. BR herself grew up being educated in parochial schools. By moving closer to her area of work, her kids were introduced to the public-school system for the first time.

As expressed in the Literature Review article "Going the Extra Mile for School Choice" (2019), certain locations can provide attractive academic offerings, but there has to be a significant benefit. The desire for kids to attend certain schools may often be superseded by what schools are in their neighborhood, what is feasible as it relates to transportation, and what resources parents have regarding school choice information. In particular, school choice information about what areas are "desirable" and which areas are "hazardous." The concept of hazardous areas is not new, but instead reconfigured. Before suburbanization in the 1950s, the Home Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC) decided who loan officers, appraisers, and real estate professionals should lend to based on the quality of the area (Mitchell, 2018). This in particular affected home ownership for minority (black) individuals, as these maps and racist practices

³⁷ For privacy the name of the institution and the areas involved are not named.

were adopted by the Federal Housing Agency. Thus, the concept of redlining was born which considered certain areas undesirable

The effects of prejudice that started with segregated housing efforts translates to schools today. This goes beyond sneaky legislative tactics, and instead begins within the homes, and why someone's area would be said to have all of the "good schools." It all starts with the property taxes that inflates or deflates public-schools within the area.

A phone interview was conducted with a parent who lived within the county where the school portion of this study took place. School officials interviewed did not have as much to say specifically about property taxes, but parent SS was able to speak about her experience as a white mom with 5 black-identifying children. She said much of her experience is shaped by white county members not knowing she has black children.

SS: Principal Dr. _____ is a real piece of work. She once told me, "If for no other reason than the people who own the lovely homes around the area, then we need better schools for them to increase property value." She went on to lead a middle school that had 80% of students (school almost 100% minority) at grade level. By the time she left their readiness was down to 30%. The county seems very respectable, and they got their propaganda together. But look at the numbers.

According to a University of California, Los Angeles report (McDonald, 2019), by 2016, 40% of all black students were enrolled in schools with 90% or more students of color. The enrollment number for public schools has increased from 43 million to 49.4 million since 1968, and even though public schools are increasing in diversity of students³⁸, this diversity is not reflected within individual schools. This might be because current policies and parental school

³⁸ Public school enrollment across the United States: 48.4% white, 26.3% Latinx, 15.2 black, 5.5% Asian, 3.6% multiracial, and 1% American Indian.

choice decisions (i.e., white flight) are actually maintaining unequal representation within schools.

Racism has perpetually gotten worse³⁹ within SS's county and school officials sent out an anonymous survey to parents asking for ideas, solutions, and compromise over what can be done for the public schools and to support integration in the area. According to SS, when results of the survey were shared, many parents expressed not wanting integration. One response on this county survey flat out said, "I don't want my children to go to school with project kids."

The school system set up a policy that allowed parents to physically send their children to schools within the district that are located outside of their designated attendance zone if (a) there were open seats within the desired school, and (b) if parents forfeited all transportation assistance (busing). Some "preferred" schools became so overcrowded that the policy had to be ceased⁴⁰.

Undesirables

There is a modern-day redlining of certain schools, and when families are assigned to "bad schools" that devalue their homes, they flee. If they cannot move from their homes, they want to switch school locations. The thought of *their* children going to *those* schools—terrible schools—terrifies certain parents. When participants in the study were asked their opinions about low-rated schools, some felt those schools should be blamed for their predicament. Comments were made such as "bad grade, bad school." Or also the reflective yet decisive response that "not all middle to lower range schools are bad, but most schools that have a 1 or 2⁴¹ rating do need to

³⁹ Direct data from the County not shared to protect anonymity.

⁴⁰ This specific information is the shared experience of the participant.

⁴¹ Numeric score is another rating system within the state, but applicable to the A-F format used for evaluation in the study.

make changes.” There was even a participant that questioned why “the rating was changed after the school year started,” and felt that there “can’t be a good reason for that.”

When people talk about utilizing school choice options, they are not talking about attending low-performing schools. Also, let us be transparent, they are not talking about schools where minority students are the majority. One school official described his direct experience of how school choice interrelates with school reputation because of certain demographics.

TB: You know I would watch a white mother with her white child and I could tell they were from—you know, they would tell me about what neighborhood they were moving into and it was a middle upper class neighborhood where they were going and they would come in the school and then they would watch a class walk by that maybe had 60 -70 percent black faces and 20 percent Latino faces and then only 10 percent white faces. And I watched this one mother in particular, I’ll never forget, I can still see the look on her face right now, her eyes almost bulged out of her head. I almost said, “Do you want to end the tour now?” It was so obvious she wasn’t going to come there.

When considering choice throughout districts there are *those* type schools that are not considered a choice at all.

Do parents really want school integration? The answer is yes, in theory, parents praise integration, but the reality is that integration consideration is not as rapidly applied in everyday school choice decisions. In a report by Torres and Weissbourd (2020), 81 percent of parents reported being either “somewhat” (27%) or “very” (54%) willing to send their children to schools that are evenly mixed (e.g., 50% white and 50% students of color). Yet, white and Asian American parent support declined when scenarios were presented that pushed their children further into the racial minority at the school. Black and Latinx parents tended to be slightly more comfortable with their kids attending schools with a lower percentage of students of their own race (Torres & Weissbourd, 2020). These findings correlate to what has been presented in this

study. The lowest ranking school in this study is located in a homogeneous environment that perpetuates a cycle of inequity.

Military

The higher rated middle school in the study, coded for anonymity as MS1⁴², had a school report card grade of “C”. Out of the middle schools throughout the district, “C” was the highest School Report Card rating given to any of the middle schools. The Illinois-born principal of this school started at the end of July 2019, receiving the position two weeks before school started. Though from out of state, she has built her whole educational career within the rural fringe county. The school has 377 students. She looked up the number for me beforehand and stated that the last time she checked the enrollment number was higher. As mentioned before, this principal is all about the military. She says the number of students fluctuates depending on where military parents decide to send their children to school. The principal says that military students provide an opportunity for new student enrollment that is not as prevalent by native county residents alone. In essence, military children are hot ticket items.

CH: So, one of my goals here when I got here is to revamp the web page the best we could to make it military friendly. So, we can get the Purple Star application. This is something the superintendent of the state says that he wants schools to do, and that applications are due February 12th. If we are proved to be a star school, when they print our school report cards, they will have a star on there and we will have that designation on our own webpage.

The principal goes on to mention that years prior, military students used to flock to the MS1, and they provided prestige and a better reputation for the school. She believes that the school is currently becoming stagnant, after military housing in her school’s area was torn down and

⁴² School Codes: C-rated elementary school: **ES1**, D-rated elementary school: **ES2**, C-rated middle: **MS1**, D-rated middle: **MS2**

moved elsewhere. The demographics of her school have changed. This is the environment that she walked into when accepting the position as principal. But she is hopeful for what she can do to bring her school back to its elite status within the community.

CH: And so, one good thing about our location is that since we are in town there are a lot of apartments, and you know low income housing that kind of thing. So, we have a real big—so I just want people to realize that this is a good school, and that we're good at school things that make the school better. So, when you send your child here, you're not worried about the child's safety. Whether that is physical, or mental, or his or her education.

Military families may be an untapped market for struggling public schools that reside near military bases. She states that she has empty classrooms, and she is determined to fill them. The competition model of school choice has principals like CH considering how she can market herself and the school as a good option for free agent students.

Whether an open heart or an open mind, many factors go into parental school choice when they are evaluating their available options within a district. Some may never have the intention of considering *those* schools that they classify as beneath them. For others, there may be opportunity for redemption. There are redlined or Red Schools that exist in almost every school district, and also the undesirables. Parents have to consider for themselves what matters when looking at schools and districts for their children.

Schools Focus and Philosophy

Below are three main areas that participants addressed when discussing the coded theme of schools' focus and philosophy, and their role throughout North Carolina's public education system.

Programs

School choice cannot be addressed during the current education climate within the country without talking about charter schools. This includes remembering a billionaire donating one hundred million dollars toward a charter takeover in Newark that crumbled an entire community's education system (we remember, Zuckerberg) and also charters becoming the only source of education in New Orleans after Katrina. Some people can clearly draw their white line in the sand, when it comes to opinions about charters, but other parents operate on a spectrum when considering if charters are the right choice for their children.

Apparently, within this study, most parent participants are against charters, but do not feel the same about other alternatives traditional public education. The school choices made by parent participants is provided in the Figure 12.

Figure 12
Parent Participants: School Types



Ninety-four percent of participants stated that their children attend a North Carolina public school. This percentage is the combined total from interviewee and survey respondents. When looking at school type for the twenty-nine parent interviewees, 81% have children in public

schools.⁴³ Yet within these interview responses more parents had students in magnet⁴⁴ schools than traditional public schools. Nearly 10% of interviewees had children attending charter schools. Though many parents within this study described their dislike of charter school growth within the state, charters did not have the lowest attendance rate among study participants. The lowest attendance rates were found in homeschooling (25) and private school attendance (8%). It is also noted that within these five school type categories, more distinguishing characteristics were shared by participants. For example, one parent stated that her child's magnet school is a Montessori, and she only selected a magnet school option because of the Montessori instructional method. Another child also attended a Montessori school, but a private one. Two students attend year-round magnet schools that were counted under the magnet school total.⁴⁵

Survey questions dissected school type further. Survey parents were asked if their children are (a) in a recognized public school within the state, (b) the cost, if any, of attendance, and (c) if their child relocated to the school in which they were currently attending.⁴⁶

Out of the 78 survey participants, 99% of survey participants stated their children are in recognized public schools within North Carolina. Seventy-two percent of participants have more than one child in public schools, and of these, 81% have both children are in public schools. Interviewees were able to indicate the type of public school amongst options such as traditional or magnet, or sometimes even public charters. However, within the survey, participants were

⁴³ Child total calculated for percentage purposes from the children indicated between the 29 interviewee participants.

⁴⁴ Magnet Schools of America defines magnet schools as such: "The single largest form of public school "choice," magnet schools are visionary, innovative and open to all students regardless of zip code," and they are typically focused around themes such as STEM magnet schools or Fine Arts magnet schools. "Magnet schools are free and open to anyone; due to high demand, most schools determine student acceptance by a lottery system. Magnet schools are accountable to state standards."

⁴⁵ The recently graduated student within this study went to a magnet school during her middle school years, and then went to a charter for high school. Also, two participants within the interview portion of this study did not disclose the information of schooling type for their children and are thus considered "Unknown" and are not included within the total percentages above.

⁴⁶ More school specific questions were asked, but these three questions are deemed most relevant for this discussion.

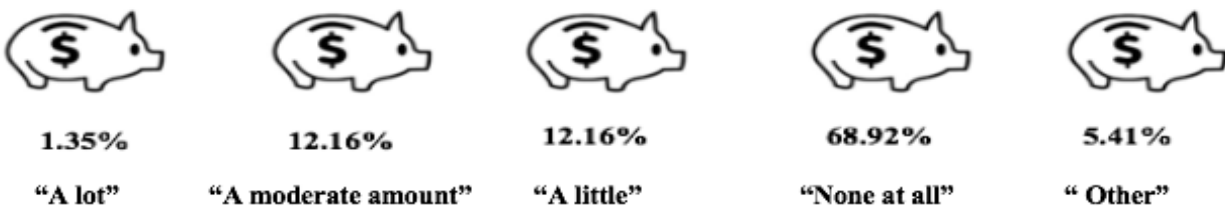
only asked if their children attended public schools. There was no area within the survey to indicate what type of public school their child attended; however, question 5 on the survey provided a working definition for “public school” as defined within the study.⁴⁷

Q5: Provided definition of public schools: a school that is maintained at public expense for the education of the children of a community or district and that constitutes a part of a system of free public education. Examples include traditional public schools, community schools, magnet schools, Montessori.

After this explanation, would you consider your child(s) a student in a recognized North Carolina Public School?

When reviewing the high percentage of survey participants who answered that their child or children attended a North Carolina public school, the correlation between cost of school attendance and school type can be considered accurate. Participants were given response options to indicate the cost of school attendance for their children. The results are represented in Figure 13.

Figure 13
Parent Participant: School Cost



Parents were asked to respond: (a) A lot, (b) A moderate amount, (c) A little, (d) None at all, or (e) Other.⁴⁸ As explored previously, the greatest single factor for school choice as indicated by

⁴⁷ It is hard to measure the benefits of adding this working definition, because parents had the option to skip this question if they did not deem it needed, or if they indicated in the question prior that they already knew the status of their child’s school type.

⁴⁸ Participants who indicated “Other” were given the option to elaborate. Most participants who chose this option indicated that they did so because they pay for school supplies, extracurricular activities, fundraisers, etcetera.

parents is location. There is potential to say that a parent’s decision to select a traditional public school in their neighborhood might have to do with location, but it could also involve consideration of cost. The majority of participants did say that they pay nothing at all for their child’s schooling, but there are still approximately 14% of participants who indicated they pay “A lot” for their child’s schooling or at least “A moderate amount.” When adding the “A little” option into the mix, approximately 26% of parent participants are paying for their child to attend a preferred school. None of these cost options on the survey allowed for further elaboration except the “Other” option. Options given were vague to allow for honest self-identification for parents.⁴⁹

These self-identified responses from participants put into perspective that parents’ school choice is leaning toward public school options for their kids. When asked if their child or children had relocated to their current schools some parents mentioned relocation. However, most indicated that their child has never relocated, and remains within their base school (school assigned by the district based on address). Survey results regarding location are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3
Parent Survey Participants: Indication of School Relocation

Q9 Did your child relocate to the school in which they currently attend from another public school, private school, or charter school?

Answer Options	%
Public school from in state	13.51%
Public school from out of state	9.46%
Private school from in state	4.05%
Private school from out of state	1.35%
Charter school from in state	0.00%
Charter school from out of state	0.00%

⁴⁹ Considerations for future studies might include adding ranges of dollar amounts for participants to select from.

Attending their same school.	63.51%
Other	8.11%
Total	100%

As teachers can be considered loyal to the teaching profession, most parents are loyal to their schools. Nearly 64% of participants remain at their same school as indicated.

Nevertheless, this is not always the case. When speaking with parent SF she mentioned the word “program” repeatedly during our forty-minute interview.⁵⁰ This passion for programs is spearheaded by her belief that parents should not feel limited when considering school choice options. They should look at every possible program choice. For her, the best choice for her daughter was a charter school.

SF: I followed the program and it really was the program, the teaching philosophy, the methodology of that school that piqued my interest and really made me look into it.

When asking participant SF if she has ever been questioned for choosing a charter school, she responded that she has. Participant SF explains what she would say to other parents trying to pick the best school for their child, whether charter or not.

SF: Well I tell you. I mean I've had parents ask me this. What I tell parents is look at the program. Look, you know, look at the program. Look at the community that the school is building. You know my philosophy of charter schools is I'm not convinced every charter school is necessarily a good thing. However, I think that there are good charter schools. And I personally don't think that charter schools hurt traditional public schools because if a student leaves from this county and moves to another county... then the money is going to get— you know, there's a lot of things from a money perspective. Traditional public schools get extra money that charter schools don't.

⁵⁰ 37 times. Counted when reviewing recording transcription file.

It is hard to say whether someone should have to justify their school choice decision for their child. However, participants consider charters a tricky situation. Parents are worried about how others are taking into consideration the public good, and what happens if other parents do not care and charters start dominating the state. But let us back track and explain how charters potentially can take money from traditional public schools and what exactly the “public good” entails.

While parent SF is steadfast in her belief in charter schools, another charter parent is not as confident as she struggles with the concept of public good, and the concern over whether she made the right choice for her child and the community as a whole.

DDO: I think our school system is broken. I think the school system in our country in general is broken. It's not seen as something that is a necessity It's not seen as an investment. Having things like schools based on their taxes and things like that ends up perpetuating the inequities we already have within the school system. Then you have people go to schools like charter schools and things like that which end up perpetuating the problem because my son's school for instance does not offer any form of transportation. Yes, there is a lottery system to get your child into the school, but those who can generally make it work to get their kids there are of higher socioeconomic status. Because you are taking them in private transportation.

Later in the interview she dove even further into the direct conflict that she feels, and the silence surrounding the school choice decision she made for her son. When asked how she, as a white woman, deals with conversations surrounding other parents and their opinions, she says that she has learned how to mute herself. She struggles to share with others her own belief regarding the rigged and wrong system, when she identifies as someone who benefits from that same system. She states that her son's school is 50-60% white, there are hardly any dual language students, and she believes the project-based learning program that the school implements is one of the few things that makes their school choice decision worthwhile for her family.

Technology

The state has many current trends that worry parents, but one that creeps and crawls its way to the top is technology in the classroom.⁵¹ As discussed in the beginning of the paper, less has to do with School Report Cards alone, as previously hypothesized. Teachers, locations, and charters are all contested issues. Yet, the technology contention is spread evenly throughout the regions with all the parents I talked with.

As I walked into the higher-rated elementary school within my study, I noticed the brightness of the facility. I noticed the clean, white, fresh paint on the walls, and how the whiteness highlighted the navy-blue stripes lined beside it. The principal came to the front desk to get me, and we passed through a hallway of little students leaning over small desks scribbling fast. When we got to her office in the back of the hallway, she mentioned how the kids scattered around were in in-school suspension. There was a blond girl at the table in the office working too, because there was no more space in the tiny hallway. The principal told the girl she had to keep working while she was interviewed. The principal then went on to describe how the students had a lot of school work that they are given while in in-school suspension to make it worthwhile. The little girl piped up and said she was finished with her vocabulary and asked if she could go to the bathroom. The principal then had multiple people come in—students about bathrooms, administrators about situations happening in real time, among other pressing things.

When we finally got into the interview, she spoke about Class Dojo, a system that is described as an interactive class page that parents can participate in and see information about their child's progress in real time. The principal stated how it keeps her involved with all of her parents. The students could get points for positive behavior, and points deducted for negative

⁵¹ I-Station, bless its heart.

behavior. The parents could see the statistical trends overtime for their child, and teachers and administrators on their end could look at class numbers for weeks to come. Different language translation options were available as well for parents who did not speak English. The system was different than any “old-school” paper newsletter or personal phone calls from administrators that I was used to growing up. But more and more it seems like technology is a wave that must be ridden within the education field.⁵²

Cut to classroom. The principal took me to where I would be observing a classroom. Every single child had a laptop at their desk. The teacher attempted to teach a virtual lesson in the form of a video game for the kids to play. Part of the way through, one child’s computer malfunctioned, and the teacher had to dedicate her time trying to troubleshoot with him. The kids started whispering at first, then they talked with their regular volume voices. One kid asked another, “Do I look like an apple?” More things are shared, giggles are had, until the one child’s laptop is finally cooperating again. The teacher is a veteran and she got the class back in action for their video game showdown. The kids played their learning game on their individual screens, but everyone’s progress was on the monitor at the front of the room. Students can see who is “winning.” I observed that kids are “winning” (learning) at different paces. One boy finished early and turned around to stare at me. Others took longer to finish the game.

While the kids were playing their learning game and making super excited shouts of joy as they progressed, the teacher came to the back of the room to chat with me. She discussed how teaching on the computer is what they do now. Her school shares a laptop cart between the few other classes on the same grade level. For their elementary school, she stated the technology is shared the same way for every grade level. She said that when they get more money next year,

⁵² And if you don’t, the surf will wipe you out.

they will get more carts so each classroom will have their own set of laptops. But for now, on this Thursday, it is her day with the cart. For her teaching was not always this way; she has been an educator for over twenty years. She said when technology first started coming into the classroom, it was off-putting, but she has been learning as the years go on. She says it has been easier for the younger teachers to get used to it, and to turn in their lesson plans on Google Doc, which is something else they have to do now too.

While class is still in session, the teacher walked around making sure everyone was on task. Toward the end of the day, students put their laptops away to charge. Then they formed two lines on opposite sides on the classroom. Each row brought someone from opposite ends to the front of the room. They played a flashcard game where one of the students is supposed to answer the multiplication problem before the other. The boys jumped every time when they were up front, trying to race to answer before the other. The six girls in the class are more soft-spoken. The teacher had a smile on her face and a gleam in her eye as she played this game with her kids that does not involve an electric plug.

This dose of no technology is felt by parent participants as well. Parent AG states that technology needs to get out of the classroom.

AG: Get technology out of the classroom... Obviously our whole society has become more tech focused. It's not limited to schools, and I assume that ten years ago we didn't have the technology in the schools, and I believe it was less tech focused.

Yet another parent has a more accepting outlook on technology and its use within the classroom.

DD: We will depend even more on technology in the next ten years and being able to meet kids and keeping them engaged and really helping them prepare for the future. Usually the pushback I've experienced is that certain people have preferences, and they say this is better than that. But then it comes down to the money about what can we afford and what can we support. So, I think any

technology is good moving forward, but we just have to be careful that we just don't fall back and let that be our approach. And we have to use technology as a tool, like we use a calculator or a pencil. I mean all of it plays its part. It's not the wonder bullet.

Back in the classroom, as the day wrapped up, the teacher and her aide wiped down the desks with Clorox wipes they bought (as I later found out). They made sure everything is disinfected for their students the next day. While they do these things, the small group of car rider students are lined along the classroom wall. The bus students have already gone. One kid whispered to ask another if the woman (i.e., me) sitting there has a laptop. Another then asked if that was an iPhone beside me. When I realized they are referring to me, without looking toward them, I lifted up my phone. The kids say, "Oooh!" until one of them asked, "Why she got that bougie cellphone?" So, the kids have a healthy aversion to fancy phones. They still chatted while filed in line. They asked if they looked like an apple. Technology is growing, but maybe it will not take over everything.

Arts and Humanities

Policy analysts can evaluate the education landscape and consider technology the direction for the future, but students cannot succeed as well-rounded individuals without the arts and humanities. The push toward the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)⁵³ fields is not new for students. Some participants spoke (both parents and school officials) about their growing concern with technology within the classroom, but little was said about the reduction of teaching using arts and humanities. This reduction is not always the outcome after a technology push within a school, but the integration of technology can

⁵³ In roughly 2014 the push was made for STEM to become STEAM, adding the initial "A" to represent Arts. The inclusion of "A" within the acronym is more accepted now than before, but where opinions fall on STEM versus STEAM is still debated today.

sometimes mean that humanities and the arts can be taken out completely, or the arts are forced to the bottom of the school curriculum. Increased teaching blocks in math and reading (tested areas) overshadow subject areas such as art and humanity-based learning.

When looking at public schools where the arts are allowed to stay, some parents have to search beyond the traditional public school route and send their kids to arts magnets.

SL: My oldest son goes to an arts magnet. You know two of his classes every day are an art. So, he gets a break from the academic work to work on a different part of who he is that's more expressive and that's creative and that's another way to connect with each other and with adults. And, I just think it helps with their health, with all of their mental health. And it's important for that child of mine.

It appears that the arts and humanities are not thriving within traditional public schools.

Parents throughout this study who mentioned arts education spoke about magnet schools for the arts as the destination where they sent their kids. Parent SL's story puts it plainly:

The arts and humanities provide an educational environment where students can get creative and learn in a new way. Traditional public schools are fine, but they do not have a wide selection of the arts. Also, if art classes are available there, they may be limited to just once a week.

If the arts are considered a learning tool and serve as an on-ramp to STEM, participant SB wants to know who is disrupting arts in public schools. She believes she knows the answer.

SB: During the class size problem—the chaos problem— where we had, at least in the House, we had bipartisan support that said, “Hey this is a bad bill” you know? Yeah, we need lower class sizes, but we can't do that at the expense of the arts. Everybody was in agreement until the Senate decided they didn't want to admit that they made a mistake in that bill, and that budget bill wasn't what was agreed upon. The Senator didn't want to make that admission. He held onto that for as long as he could.

In North Carolina, a mandated reduction in class size, increased the number of rooms needed within each school, resulting in the elimination of many extracurricular classes (i.e., art, music, etc.). Sometimes the presence of arts in school is justified by how the arts transfers into other academic domains; however, the arts are important in their own right. One would not justify mathematics education on whether such study leads to stronger English or Latin skills, nor should the presence of arts in public schools rely on justification for its impact on traditional academic areas (Winner, 2000).

For parents who believe in the arts and can afford to expand outside of traditional public school options, their school choice selection is guided by schools that have prioritized arts and humanities programs. In the meantime, students who attend traditional public schools may be deprived of opportunities in the arts and humanities.

Students are always learning in their school environment what matters. Whether they are trying to gauge their teacher to determine how to get the best grade out of the class or if they are learning the number of attempts they can make to secure a bathroom break. Students are always learning beyond the smartboard about what they can get away with—social cues about what is appropriate. They also learn what is important and valued within the world. When they watch the paint brushes being packed away, the band room being locked up for the last time, the projector turned off in the creative writing room—they are learning something new, again. They are learning that the arts do not matter.

Available Services

Following are the three main areas that participants addressed when discussing the coded theme of services, and their role throughout North Carolina's public education system.

Exceptional Children

I cannot remember the sandwich, but I remember the creamy macaroni. When interviewing parents, I went where they were most comfortable. For parent KGA, that meant a Panera Bread located five minutes from her place of work. As we settled at a small rounded table near the window, she let me know that she had not taken a lunch break in weeks because of special projects going on at her office. She described taking the time to speak about the state's education debacles as a much-needed reprieve.

KGA was one of the few participants who had not heard about the state's school report card rating system. When I asked her the preliminary questions about the report cards, she asked if the school report cards were the same as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and when I said no, she then asked if the school report cards were similar to that system where "when you go to look at buying a house, and it puts the schools in their report card," and I had to give her a no to that too. It became established early in the interview that her school choice decision was not based on the school report cards.

Instead, her school choice was based on word of mouth from other residents within her small community.

KGA: When I was looking at what elementary school to go to, I mean we're out in a small town so there weren't that many, and basically our neighborhood school was good. Like, every parent I talked to was happy there. And I talked to my friends in another larger, more affluent county, and they're like, "Well we're going to apply to this school, we're going to go to this," you know, "we're gonna tour all

these different schools.” Then they’d be like, “Where are you going?” And I’d say, “I’m going right down the road.”

KGA spoke about liking the year-round schedule at the school where her daughter and son attended. She said the family liked their breaks spaced out. They prefer to go to Disney in February when no one else is there. However, the school option chosen for her kids has provided benefits beyond Mickey Mouse.

KGA: Now on the tail end, the benefits of year-round is... I can tell with my son behaviorally that we're coming up to a track out. So, my son has ADHD. He also has Oppositional Defiance Disorder. And we are also starting to identify that he has dyslexia. His is different than my daughter's. So that's why it's a little slower for us. But he has ADHD and hyperactivity. Very extreme. So, I can tell when he's getting exhausted in school and he needs a break. Now with my daughter she needs that brain break. Because with her dyslexia her brain has to work four times harder than any other kid. And so, she can only do that for short bursts before she needs a mental break.

KGA was not the only parent interviewed who has kids with special needs and require more support within school.

In the 1970s, rights for children considered special needs were changed with landmark cases won. These rights stated that child with disabilities have the same rights to a public education as children without disabilities (Wettach, 2017). When the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA) transformed into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), more growth in addressing the needs of exceptional children was made. The desire was that more persons would be guaranteed protection from discrimination regardless of their abilities. As a result of IDEA, each state receives federal money to help provide special education services to children with qualifying disabilities (Wettach, 2017). Funding is great, but other thought leaders wanted to take recognition of students with disabilities further.

In 1972, the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, Elliot L. Richardson, spoke about the Project on Classification of Exceptional Children. The project was created as a response to a believed national crisis of inappropriate labeling and classification of exceptional children, which led to inappropriate diagnosis, treatment, and education (Hobbs, 1975).⁵⁴ Projects such as the Classification of Exceptional Children are helpful for expanding the definition of EC students, but the process of changing a label is only a small step forward. Some parents within this study believe that the state has substituted the label “special needs” with “Exceptional Children” (EC) to make the categorization easier to accept. They believe it is a Band-Aid on a wound. They do not want new names for a condition that requires the same needs as before.

“All of a sudden, I got a letter in the mail from the school district, and it says, ‘Your child has been identified as being part of the Exceptional Students Program.’ So, then I call the school, and I’m like, ‘Hey, I received correspondence from the district’—like, exceptional can mean a couple of different things. I remember talking to friends who have always lived in North Carolina. I’m asking them what they think it means, even though in my heart I knew this did not mean exceptional in an academically gifted way. So, I went to the school and they told me I have to wait for more information to come down from the district. And then I met with his teacher, and she says, ‘I’m not allowed to tell you this, but Exceptional means that your son is exceptional challenged, and he is going to need intervention.’ So, yeah, that’s how I was told.”

Parents in my study face realities they cannot change. Approximately 28% of participants reported that their child is categorized as EC. For each parent, their journey rearing an

“For my girls they’re called 2e, twice exceptional. So, they have a profound learning disability, but they are also exceptionally bright. So, with that 2e, twice exceptional, they’re really hard kids to teach, because putting them into a gifted classroom when they can’t keep up...but they can process really complicated material. But they can’t keep up with reading one book every week.”

exceptional child varies. Local funding, available services, and the quality of educators and staff all

“The county preschool...they were so focused on autism. My son was so young. That was a quick label. It just didn’t make sense to my husband and I...my son ended up going to a local center school that was a preschool created by a speech therapist. He could go to school there and have a typical day. So, what’s important to me in looking at schools is inclusive services. Which is why I don’t like using the word disability. I like the word learning difference. Because he just learns differently.”

determine a child’s learning outcomes for life. Students

⁵⁴ In Richardson’s definition exceptional children includes special needs students but also disadvantaged and delinquent students. This encompassing definition will be the standard for addressing Exceptional Children in this paper.

“I spent the summer just kind of reeling from the, ‘What did I miss?’ and ‘How did I?’ questions in my head. There’s something wrong, and they’re telling me my daughter is fine. I spent time wondering what broke down in the process. And that’s when I educated myself. And then, I went back at it with the school. That fall, I went and got a private psychologist, paid for it out of pocket. Got the eight hours of testing—a 16-page report. I scheduled another meeting, went to the school and I said, ‘There’s something wrong with her. What are you going to do about it?’ We had seven hours of meetings. They fought me and fought me and fought me. Basically, I said at the end, ‘You keep putting hoops in front of me, and I am going to keep jumping through them because you’re going to do the right thing. I’m not going to stop.’ And it was within about 10 minutes that they came back and said, ‘Okay, so we’ll give her an IEP.’”

will either be prepared for success regardless of their status or they are set up for failure from the beginning. In this way, school choice decision-making for parents with exceptional kids is an insurmountable burden that never goes away.

There is much stacked against EC students, as seen from the reeling quotes presented throughout this section. The

experiences of the students matter, but the perspective of parents shows the fight on behalf of students and the whole family. When the battle is being fought for Exceptional Children, the determining factor—no matter the school chosen—rests on the will of exceptional parents.

AIG

Academically and Intellectually Gifted (AIG) is another label given to students in the public education system. While Exceptional Children is a measure that accounts for students with qualifying disabilities, to be an AIG student is to represent being the “cream of the crop.”

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC; 2020) created a short brief that explains the origins of gifted education. Early studies of giftedness began in the 1920s to 1930s and pioneers in the field, Lewis Terman and Leta Stetter Hollingworth, conducted the first widely published research studies on gifted children. In the 1970s the federal government brought gifted children back into the spotlight (NAGC, 2019) and expanded the definition of giftedness along with programming options available. The Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act helped fund the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented. All the talk of

giftedness is giving X-Men vibes, and it would seem like we are discussing the Xavier Institute for Gifted Youngsters.⁵⁵ However, these students are not mutants; they are bright kids who have special instructional needs.

Twenty-four percent of parents reported that their child is classified as AIG within their public school system.⁵⁶ The percentage of parents with EC students within this study totals 31%. Overlapping parents with twice exceptional or 2e students (both gifted and have a specific learning disability), accounted for approximately 4% of the participants. Parents with AIG, 2e, or EC students made up 59% of the study.⁵⁷ Thus, the majority of parents have a child(s) with some identifying status.

From the participants in this study, the parents who have gifted children have different opinions on how to ensure their success and prevent their child's learning from stalling after they reach a ceiling. For parents with AIG students, school choice goes beyond getting a sound education, and instead means ensuring their exceptional⁵⁸ students reach their full potential. A report released by the NC State Board of Education and the NC Department of Public Instruction, stated that AIG students account for 12.48% of students in North Carolina. Forty-nine percent of AIG statewide are female and 47% of all AIG students in North Carolina are white. The rest of the percentages are composed of different racial groups: Hispanic, Black,

⁵⁵ Or also called the Xavier School, the Xavier Institute for Higher Learning, Xavier School for Gifted Children, or even "We're-All-Gonna-Die" High. Information provided by an avid fan who is also a Wiki user. Consider information with caution. ("What is the name" 2015)

⁵⁶ The survey respondents did not share any labels associated with their children whether EC or AIG. There was not a specific question that asked for that identifying information, but the final question toward the end about any final comments did not include references to EC or AIG status either. Thus, percentages of participants with EC or AIG identified students come from interviewees.

⁵⁷ Total of percentages will not equal 100% from the sum of the individual percentages.

⁵⁸ Exceptional here meaning the original definition of the word. Examples include excellent, bright, remarkable.

Asian, Multiracial, Pacific Islander. Black students represent approximately 26% of all gifted students in North Carolina, while Hispanic students held under twenty percent (18.61%).⁵⁹

Table 4 details racial breakdown for participants within this study who have children with one or more academic labels.

Table 4⁶⁰
Race of parents who have AIG, EC, or 2e children

Race of Participants	Academically and Intellectually Gifted	Exceptional Child(s)	Twice-Gifted
Black	7%	0%	0%
White	72%	31%	4%
Latinx	0%	0%	0%
Multiracial	0%	0%	0%

Compared to other minority groups within this study, Black students do hold some percentage of representation, all under the AIG designation. This may seem like a slight positive for black students in terms of representation in the AIG space. However, parent CSR’s experience highlights a reality that students of color face when participating in prestigious AIG programs. Her daughter has been identified as gifted since kindergarten, and yet this is their lived experience.

CSR: My child experienced some trauma when she was younger. She witnessed her father being murdered when she was six years old. And so, she's put up a wall. She doesn't really show emotion other than anger. So, if, for example that teacher that made the other child cry—my child won't cry, but my child will talk back and lash

⁵⁹ Other demographic numbers by race: 3.49% Asian, 4.53% Multiracial, 1.17% Native American, 0.14% Pacific Islander.

⁶⁰ Statewide percentages and all Table 7 data was obtained through the website PublicSchoolsK12 (“North Carolina Public Schools”). They acknowledge that source material was obtained in part by the U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Census Bureau, the Bureau of Labor and Statistics & various other external sources.

out. Like, you have to approach her a certain way. At the beginning of the school year, I told them this—I've done this every year with new teachers since kindergarten. I've told these teachers when she has them. This is what happened to her. This is what she experienced. This is the type of child she is. This is the best way to communicate with her. And she's had issues with, I think two of her four core teachers in this magnet school. She has been put in suspension. Now-my child was elementary school student of the year while in the public-school last year. My child never got in trouble in elementary. Now that we're at this school, she doesn't fit the typical child that goes to this school, you know the artsy type. [Those] girls don't pop back. They're pretty quiet and kind of nerdy. My child doesn't fit that cookie cutter mold. The teachers don't like her. Not all teachers but some of her teachers don't like her. They don't know how to manage her.

CSR is a determined black mother who is divorced and providing for her family as a single parent, without need for pity. She sent her daughter to a prestigious magnet school hoping to give her AIG child better opportunities. She stated that the traditional public school her child used to attend was wonderful, but since moving her daughter to the A-rated magnet school, she has had problems that are growing to a level where parent coalitions are forming to protect and advocate for students of color within the school.

Participant IF's experience differs greatly from that of CSR, as her problems getting her children through AIG had nothing to do with race. Participant IF was the first participant who I spoke with who said she has a child identified as an AIG student. I went to meet her at an elementary school close to her house. When coordinating the interview, she told me that it was the elementary school where her two children attended. I did not realize that she also served as one of the few participants in this study who had also been an educator. When I got to the school she informed me that she also worked there as a teacher's aide.

While walking the halls, young kids ran about as the school day came to a close. We went around the school looking for a quiet place to interview. That was ambitious of us, at the end of a busy school day, but we were hopeful. On our search we passed a male teacher who she

told me was the current math teacher for her son. We stopped by the classroom of a social studies teacher who she is close with but who could not open up her classroom to us as she took the end of the day to do lesson planning. IF and I finally found a place to settle in a small computer lab. We sat in the tiny, plastic kid-sized seats and started speaking about her perspective of the state's education system.

Born in the former Soviet Union in Belarus, participant IF says she takes a realistic approach when considering the giftedness of her children.

IF: I mean, no one's gonna cry me any sad tears about how my gifted kids aren't getting enough services, but at the same time, like, they don't have enough on that end. It's more important district wide for them to bring other kids up to grade levels, not even just kids of special needs but even kids that are just lagging. There's a lot of focus on that. And so, then the kids that are up there at a high level, maybe my fifth graders a little bit bored. But there's a different priority. But it would be nice if they had a little bit more... And as a parent of kids that are gifted, I feel like every year my kids have had less than the kids in the year before them. Especially for my fifth grader because she's grown up here and each year there has been less resources. She only has two fulltime gifted teachers. So, you know, no one is gonna cry me any poor sad tears about how my gifted children just aren't challenged enough.

Participant IF questions her struggles, but her perspective emphasizes another issue with AIG. This is the challenge: How many services should go to the gifted when a proportionate number of students are lagging behind? When considering the opposite ends of the academic spectrum, what choices do parents have for their AIG children? In North Carolina, Article 9B⁶¹ was written into law and addresses the rights of academically and intellectually gifted students. The General Assembly believed that “public schools should challenge all students to aim for academic excellence and that academically or intellectually gifted students perform or show the

⁶¹ Article 9B. Conferred by the NC General Assembly and passed into law in 2009. The information is published across the state, including on the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction website.

potential to perform at substantially high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age” (North Carolina General Assembly, 1996, p.1). This high performance is something that the General Assembly believed should be nurtured. So, a plan was set in place that detailed the responsibilities of the NC State Board of Education. Under Article 9B, the NC State Board of Education must (a) disseminate guidelines to school districts for developing local AIG plans, and (b) provide ongoing technical assistance to school districts in the development, implementation, and evaluation of local AIG plans.

I wonder if participant IF knows that legislation is in place that should have her back and ensure that her children are getting proper treatment as AIG students. Unlike participant CSR, participant IF is satisfied with her school choice. However, her family’s school choice is based on neighborhood location. For her, the overall benefits of her family’s school choice decision outweigh the lack of services provided for her AIG-identified children.

Whether a matter of racial prejudice or lacking services, the NC State Board of Education created a call to action⁶² to address equity needed in the gifted education space. There were six distinct action steps, the first three being: (a) reframe your lens, (b) use equitable identification practices, and (c) provide a range of services with the program. Each of these three action steps reflect the state’s spoken mission to provide more fair treatment in the gifted identification and management process, and also the right for gifted students to be provided services that are appropriately challenging. However, sometimes inequitable actions and lack of proper challenging collide. This was the circumstance surrounding participant LM’s child.

LM: We get through the first quarter of grading by third grade, and she got threes. I remember having a conference and saying, “I’m a little perplexed about these

⁶² This call to action was titled “Critical Actions to Realize Equity and Excellence in Gifted Education: Changing Mindsets, Policies, and Practices” Citation: (“North Carolina Department” 2019). Elaborated in reference.

grades.” Consistently she gets four, so how did she end up with a three? The teacher confessed and said, “I didn’t know I could give her a four.” I got an unease in the pit of my stomach.

Researcher: Why did they say they didn’t know they could give her a four?

LM: Exactly. That was my question too. So, I basically told her, “You might want to go talk to your principal, because if she earned a four, she should get the four.” So, “I’m going to ask that you change that grade.” Then the teacher did. Cause I already knew that was the quality work that my daughter was doing. The whole thing was a weird moment. Then my daughter got into the Academically Gifted program. She was the only black student. And yeah, there's so much of her journey with that...

In this instance, participant LM knows that her daughter constantly gets material that she succeeds in, yet she is affected by inequitable grading. There is disconnect and breakdown with the academic side of giftedness. Still, there is also the perspective of other parents like MMS that face hurdles providing for her artistically gifted daughter. Participant MMS holds her own opinion about how equity looks within gifted programs.

MMS: Now the school board member said to me, about the lottery, she goes, “Well what if the other child who gets in in front of your child. What if that child is the next Picasso and they haven't had the opportunities your child has had?” And I said, “OK so what if my child is the next Picasso?” And not only that but are you telling me that because I'm a middle-class family, and I can afford private instruction that that's OK? I don't deserve to have a quality, gifted art school because I'm what? I'm too rich? Like, I was actually kind of stunned I heard that. I was like, “Oh, so what you're really saying is that the lottery is not meant for me. It's meant for the poor kids.” I mean, God bless them if they have artistic talent. But does that mean that my child should be held back because another child hasn't been exposed?⁶³

Lottery systems play a role in gifted access for artistically talented students. If a student qualifies for AIG in NC, they must be served, but “the arts” is not an area of giftedness

⁶³ What a question.

recognized by the state – only academic and intellectual giftedness. In general, local education agencies (LEA) have different criteria for giftedness from district to district and state to state.

When reviewing the *State of the States in Gifted Education* report (NAGC, 2015), 28 states reported that LEAs within the same state are not required to use the same identification process. Nineteen states left the identification process to LEAs, and 3 states had no state policy at all. Parents make their school choice decisions to try and create the best opportunity for their children, but just like Exceptional Child status, the variation of resources available for gifted students within and across schools varies.

Mental Health

Services influence school choice not only academically or artistically, but socially and emotionally. When I entered my final school of this study, a middle school, I sat down beside teacher BB in her classroom. This was her first-year teaching fulltime after graduating in 2018 from a teaching program. She was sitting on top of the table beside me monitoring the mock classroom store set up for her students. The students' "good bucks" they earned from participation points and for good behavior were out. She let me know how she purchased everything in the school store herself like the notebooks, silly ink pens, and chocolate candies. While she collected their bucks, I observed her and the class, and asked about her journey thus far. She said the toughest situation she had faced was a student who got committed and put on suicide watch the day before.

BB: I have a sixth grader. She is on suicide watch. They had to commit her. Yeah, so that was new. I haven't had that ever happen before. She was one of my students, and I was told yesterday after school. I don't know what happens now. She's a very sweet girl. We've been dealing with a lot of stuff like that this year.

BB was not wrong in her assessment. I found out later from the principal that the girl got put on suicide watch because she wanted to slit her throat. When speaking to Principal MJ, she explained her experiences dealing with mental health in the school.

MJ: We've had two students to commit suicide since I've been here. Yes ma'am. My first year here it was a boy. He was my boy! I knew he had problems. We dealt with him all year long. His mother didn't know what to do. She was kind of contributory to the whole process. She did not know how to set boundaries and she was just like, "Whatever." And he got into a situation where he got put out of a skating rink for smoking marijuana in there, and he goes home—Grandma and Grandpa picks him up and brings him home—and he OD'ed on other drugs in grandmas' bed that night. So that just took me out.

She felt like things might be turning for the better, as this last year had no incidents.

MJ: This summer passed. That was good—there was nobody. But now I get girls, they cut in themselves. One girl yesterday said she wanted to slit her throat. They had to come and commit her. She's gone. They took her out. They took her yesterday. Someone came. We have this group that has a mobile crisis unit. So, we call them, and they'll come out and assess the situation. The woman assessing was like, "Oh yeah she needs help." They've come to the school for this girl twice, and both times she's taken.

When speaking to parents who have children with mental health concerns, they explained their experience getting mental health treatment for their children within school. They said most times there is one school psychologist for every two schools, same for social workers. Or, if social workers and school psychologists are assigned to one school, they endure heavy student caseloads. Bastian, Akos, Domina, & Griffard (2019) confirm the sparse allocation of student support personnel in public schools expressed by parents.

Support personnel are described as individuals that handle student needs that are often beyond the purview of classroom curriculum and instruction, and they play a part in developing students' social-emotional wellness. However, for every 1,669 students, there is ONE full-time school psychologists—a ratio indicating they are over capacity. School

social workers are only slightly better with a 1:1,374 ratio, and they remain over their capacity as well (Bastian, Akos, Domina, & Griffard, 2019).

For parents dealing with children who need extra care in the area of mental health, finding schools with adept psychological services can drive parent school choice decisions. However, the one caveat is finding support personnel resources within a school where the workers are not overextended. This study has shown that when reviewing services for school choice decision-making, parents are drawn to schools with ample services that address a nuance of concerns. This study also finds, based on qualitative results, that the lack of resources permeates throughout the public education system in the state, no matter the service type needed.

Local Political Climate

Three main areas that participants addressed under the coded theme of politics include grievances, ghosting, and legislators.

Grievances

When I met the principal of the lower rated elementary school for the first time, she was working the breakfast line in the cafeteria by passing out pancake sticks and cartons of milk to the students. She got out from behind the food line when I waved to her from the front of the room, leaving the rest of the teachers “on the line” to finish the morning breakfast shift. As she walked over, students stopped and gave her hugs. One girl said she liked her dreadlocks, and another boy talked to her about how he did not yet have his rap for her completed. Principal PF said she could not wait to hear it. She looked comfortable and at ease with her students, and the teachers nodded and smiled as she passed. I asked if she grew up in the county and how long she

had been the principal of the school. She looked so in tune with her environment. When I asked this question, she looked at me sternly and told me she is not from here. She said, “I don’t want to live here.”

While shadowing Principal PF and speaking with her, she described how she lives with her mother-in-law during the weekdays and drives two hours back to her home—two towns away. She said that her husband is there. Her life is there. However, she was called to swoop in and save this school where she has worked as a principal for the past year.

The school is turning around for the better, but the principal wants to turn away—for good. If a principal does not want to stay or even live within the school’s community, perhaps it is no wonder parents struggle with their own choices. Throughout this study, parents have often discussed their opinion that school choice is not a choice if the options available are insufficient at providing the best quality education for all students.

The *Leandro*⁶⁴ court case filed against the state of North Carolina must be mentioned. The filing process began in 1994 as parents from poor school systems across the state, and later on parents from larger and wealthier school districts, came together as plaintiffs and plaintiff intervenors against the state of North Carolina and the State Board of Education for denying the rights to a sound basic education. The North Carolina Constitution states that (a) people have a right to the privilege of education, and it is the duty of the state to guard and maintain that right, and (b) the General Assembly shall provide by taxation and otherwise for a general and uniform system of free public schools...wherein equal opportunities shall be provided for all students.⁶⁵

Participants throughout this study contested what can be equal about a system where exceeding growth can still place a school with a bad report card grade. When discussing the

⁶⁴ *Leandro v. State*, 346 N.C. 336, 347 (1997) (“*Leandro I*”)

⁶⁵ From the North Carolina Bar Association Foundation Continuing Legal Education

county and state education system with one participant in this study, she said that people throughout the state only care about CYA. When asked what that means, she stated, “Cover Your Ass.”

Principal PF’s school might be suffering from the CYA approach from the state. She described how even after being hired for the cleanup job in her current school, the threat of state takeover loomed over her head until she successfully raised the letter grade for the school. She received no assistance and no extra resources to create the “sound basic education” that should be provided for students. She did not even receive resources for new textbooks. She did not get paint to brighten the hallways. In fact, she personally hired vendors to paint her school from a dreary gray and dark green color scheme to bright white and emerald green. While observing her throughout the day, workers were called in to fix water fountains that were running brown. These are some of the things that teacher and principal participants alike throughout the study said happen on a daily basis, and it might take weeks to get a response from district or even state officials if need be.

Some parents are not buying it, though. They consider all of these things excuses. They do believe in a sound basic education, but when considering school choice, they hold most of the responsibility on the school. They keep out the politics.

JL: Yeah, I just don’t enjoy politics at all. I think it's the responsibility of the administration to say this is what we do at the school now. You know, make it happen. I understand that not everybody is wanting to have to confront...I'm not saying that's what you need to do but I think it certainly needs to be a top down within the school. The boss says “We need to do this. This is good for kids and families and for schools, so let’s work together to make this happen.” And you can’t just do what you want to do. I don’t know. That’s why we have principals. I think some administration and the relationship between the administration and the staff could be more businesslike. There are some things that [principals] are bound by but other things are just choices.

Politics are interwoven throughout the fabric of education, and sometimes it affects the resources and quality of an overall school. However, within a county or at the state level, some parents believe in the good effort of schools, despite lack of bureaucratic support. Other participants believe that true school choice comes from school administrators and educators proving, on their own, how they are providing the sound basic education all students deserve.

Ghosting

The concept of ghosting has gone beyond Urban Dictionary (“Ghosting,” 2016) and made its way to the Merriam-Webster (“Definition,” 2020). Merriam-Webster (2020) defines ghosting as “the act or practice of abruptly cutting off all contact with someone by no longer accepting or responding to phone calls, instant messages, etc.” I do not know if participant RR, a parent in the county where the school portion of the study took place, realized that *ghosting* was the phenomena she was dealing with when trying to advocate for her son.

The ghosting started after RR circumvented the chain of command with school officials after they refused to acknowledge the severity of bruises found on her son.

RR: My son went through the public-school system, and I decided after kindergarten that I didn't want him to be in public school anymore. I found bruises on his back that the teachers never told me about. And I found out he had them after being bullied really bad, and then the teacher didn't want to do anything about it. The principal didn't want to do anything about it. The EC director wouldn't help me, and the county superintendent wouldn't help me. So, I filed a state complaint with the Department of Instruction at that time.

This is a succinct version of what shaped her perspective of the public school system, and why she now chooses a charter school for her son instead of a traditional public school. However, she had a long journey of ghosting and a general lack of response from the school before reaching out to district leadership.

RR: The principal, when I went to him, he told me that bullying didn't happen until third grade and that there was nothing going on. I was trying to make it work out at the school because in my eyes this school was doing something wrong and they should stop the school from doing something wrong. Why do I have to leave? I called the superintendent every day for two weeks until he finally called me back. His secretary just kept taking a message from me. I don't know why he wouldn't call me back. They would tell me things like, "Oh he just left the office where he's in a meeting" or you know just excuse after excuse. I later found out that that's what he does with all families. It wasn't just my family.

Participant RR was also one of the few parents who mentioned the involvement of their husband in helping secure fairness for their child's education.

RR: After the first week when I called every day, and he wouldn't call back, my husband and I both started calling. I would call in the morning, my husband would call in the afternoon, and we were both leaving messages every day for that superintendent to call us. When the superintendent finally did call us, we spent probably about 45 minutes on the phone with him and he tried to spin the whole thing around like it was our fault that our son was getting kicked in the back at school with bruises on him. And he was not very nice. He was very rude to us, and he kind of told us the same thing that the principal did. That there's no way that bullying has happened and that it is that bad. Well, I have pictures to prove it.

The ghosting of participant RR is just one reason why addressing politics in the education system matters. This situation goes beyond the public education system losing another student. School-based and district and state level officials affect everything about education. Politics matter whether participants agree that should be the case or not.

Legislators

Lack of principal engagement and ghosting aside, it can be presumed that the majority involved with education are seeking the betterment for students across the nation. This achievement first takes admitting that education and politics cannot be separated. Leaders from both areas must come together and agree that education is an inherently political enterprise (Greene & McShane, 2018). Parent TG, however, disagrees. He is one of the strong advocates

for opposing the coupling of education and politics. For someone running for a senate seat, he does not believe school choice should be based on factors that involve politics of any kind, not at the district or state level. He would consider parent RR's story as one of the reasons why the current county hierarchical system is failing parents and students.

TG: Expanding school choice is really what we can work towards and work for so that all people from all walks of life and all income levels can have an opportunity. In order for them to make an informed decision on what's best for their own lives and their own family and getting the bureaucratic government tentacles out of our daily lives.

I asked him if that was his campaign slogan. It was not. Nevertheless, he has points that should be considered around school choice. If politics are supposed to work and advance education rights for all, how can that be ensured? The bureaucracies at play control a significant part of the education system, especially with regard to budgets.

According to research obtained from the North Carolina Center for County Research (2017), county board of commissioners "allocate funds to the school board(s) in the county, and the school board(s) allocate county funds to individual schools" (p. 3). Thus, counties cannot directly fund schools. This is one reason it is essential to get support from superintendents first, as they can relay information to the local board of education. Superintendents cannot directly vote in meetings, but they can effectively influence which way district funding flows. According to the North Carolina General Assembly statutes Article 31 (1981), during the end of every fiscal year, superintendents must compose a budget for consideration to the local board of education, and "the board of education shall consider the budget, make such changes therein as it deems advisable, and submit the entire budget" (p.5) to the board of county commissioners.

Under this back and forth process for budget allocation, schools are hot potatoed between specific district policies and school board and superintendent priorities. Parents such as TG question what is happening with money allocated for education.

TG: There's a lot of discrepancies with what education funds there is. There is a lot I can't get into at the moment, but do you really think that... Let's say we give every teacher in North Carolina a five thousand dollar a year raise, okay? That's a lot of money, right? That's millions of dollars. And just raises. Okay, that is a five thousand dollar a year raise for teachers across the state. Everywhere. My question is will that amount of money make our schools better? I'm not really sure. There is a lot of waste here. You know they're burning books that are only a year or two old. The state of North Carolina is burning education books—burning, burning, burning them, catching them on fire and burning them⁶⁶.

Upon first searches to fact-check information from TG's statement, the first article to come up was "*Book Burning: North Carolina Church to Destroy 'Satan's Books'*" (Miller, 2011). Other similar articles soon followed. Information has not been found, as of yet, to confirm or deny the burning of textbooks in North Carolina.

Some parents such as TST held strong political opinions, not because of budgets or book burnings, but from observing how legislative officials interact and work together in general.

TST: And so... how do you enforce change? Well, if you want to make a change you have to be able to get all parties to the table and to listen to one another and to find some compromise in there. And you know for the life of me I wish we could just remove D and R and I⁶⁷. Just have everybody sit at the table as who they are and make decisions and vote on things. Based on what they think is the right thing to do not what my party says I should do, or what your party says you should do. I think the best way to make the change is to be able to communicate better with one another and remember what compromise is. And remember students are the ones we're trying to do the most for.

⁶⁶ I am sure the Facebook Group where TG and I connected would have ample articles to address the book burning. However, after my open-call post for participants was removed from the group, I bowed out and removed myself from the group completely.

⁶⁷ Party system of Democrat, Republican, and Independent

TST has a hopeful perspective for what compromise could look like, but she also expressed concern about how she would be able to initiate that change across different parties.

TST: In the state of things now reaching across the aisle and hearing other people's ideas for common ground would be welcomed by another party. But then my own party would be mad at me for reaching across the aisle. That's not a good environment. But I think other people would want to be involved...to find what they think is the best compromise.

Researcher: Do you mind sharing your party?

TST: I am Republican⁶⁸.

Politics affects the education system and how it operates. This impacts every person, including those who do not like politics, who had terrible experiences, and those with strong political ideals. More likely than not, politics, for better or worse, influence the school choice landscape we see today.

⁶⁸ Participant TST felt it important to note the next day after the interview that she felt the Democratic party also probably has resistance when it comes to reaching out across party lines as well.

Discussion

As discussed earlier in the paper, the original predictions around the importance of school report cards were unfounded. The results of this study were comparable to previous literature in terms of factors at play when it comes to the range of school choice dealt with during these modern times. Some differences that occurred involved the specific nature of this study being conducted in North Carolina. There were certain policy references and parent frustrations that were unique to this particular state, including county specifics mentioned, state regulations, arts magnets, etc.

There are considerations that future researchers should address including: (a) gathering more father participants and male involvement in general to observe if this provides a new perspective, (b) include high school aged students—high school students were omitted from this study to focus more on the developmental years of students, and when parents may be more likely to invest in educational concerns as students start out on their academic journey. However, similar to gaining more male perspective, more opportunities for different perspectives can be provided as well from parents dealing with high school aged students. Finally, (c) future researchers should consider spending more time in individual schools. Research obtained in this study involved results gathered from one full day of observations and interviews. More in-depth observation could be had with more time within the schools. Limitations of this approach might include school officials worry regarding potential class and school day disruption.

Conclusion

School choice is only as strong as parents' perceptions of choice options. The choice options that parents consider are not explicitly tied to school performance grades; indeed, numerous factors are deemed important when considering school quality. The five influential factors in this study—teacher satisfaction, school location, school focus and philosophy, support services, and local politics—are themes that emerged amongst multiple participants, though the responses were rooted in individual stories and lived experiences. The participants' narratives highlight the importance of perspective.

Once rooted in the intentions of providing better educational opportunities amongst all students, school choice evolved as parents considered what matters most for their families. The balance between public good and personalized needs is tight-roped within participants' consciousness. The findings from this study capitalize on the fact that parents are astute and very aware of their needs and, in particular, what they and their child need in a school. This offers belief and hope concerning the public school system in North Carolina, as most participants want to continue with public education, as long as factors that impact their needs are being addressed. There are logical steps that will make public schools a more equitable system and help alleviate bias when parents are making school choice decisions. For an effective school choice system to work:

1. The socioeconomic, emotional, and society pressures placed on teachers must be reduced;
2. Schools and their location must be considered within historical knowledge such as redlining, demographic bias, and/or previous affluence associated with certain schools;
3. When reviewing schools, parents need to be presented with information regarding school type, focus, and philosophy;
4. Schools need to assure parents they are providing appropriate services for students who have different learning needs; and,

5. State leaders need to acknowledge⁶⁹ and actively work to ameliorate the negative impact that politics has on the state's public school system.

What has been most remarkable in conducting this study—besides the fact that I was able to in the first place—is how parents and schools participated fully and openly to this process. As mentioned in the beginning, this study is a compilation for those who are influenced the most by school choice decisions, not just with regards to the choices made for themselves, but how school choice decisions as a whole impress upon others within the community. Perception is everything, and after conducting this study it is my perception that parents value staying in public schools, even when they have to deal with messy, intricate, and raw school choice decision making.

⁶⁹ Acknowledgment is not suggested to advocate or insist on the integration of politics into school choice, but to address the impacts politics already has within the space.

Appendix A: Locale Classifications and Criteria

Figure A1
Guidelines for classifying county sizes

Locale Classifications and Criteria

The NCES locale framework is composed of four basic types (City, Suburban, Town, and Rural) that each contains three subtypes. It relies on standard urban and rural definitions developed by the U.S. Census Bureau, and each type of locale is either urban or rural in its entirety. The NCES locales can be fully collapsed into a basic urban–rural dichotomy, or expanded into a more detailed collection of 12 distinct categories. These subtypes are differentiated by size (in the case of City and Suburban assignments) and proximity (in the case of Town and Rural assignments). For additional information about the locale criteria, see the [Locale Boundaries file documentation](#).

City – Large (11): Territory inside an Urbanized Area and inside a Principal City with population of 250,000 or more.

City – Midsize (12): Territory inside an Urbanized Area and inside a Principal City with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.

City – Small (13): Territory inside an Urbanized Area and inside a Principal City with population less than 100,000.

Suburban – Large (21): Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population of 250,000 or more.

Suburban – Midsize (22): Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population less than 250,000 and greater than or equal to 100,000.

Suburban – Small (23): Territory outside a Principal City and inside an Urbanized Area with population less than 100,000.

Town – Fringe (31): Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urbanized Area.

Town – Distant (32): Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an Urbanized Area.

Town – Remote (33): Territory inside an Urban Cluster that is more than 35 miles from an Urbanized Area.

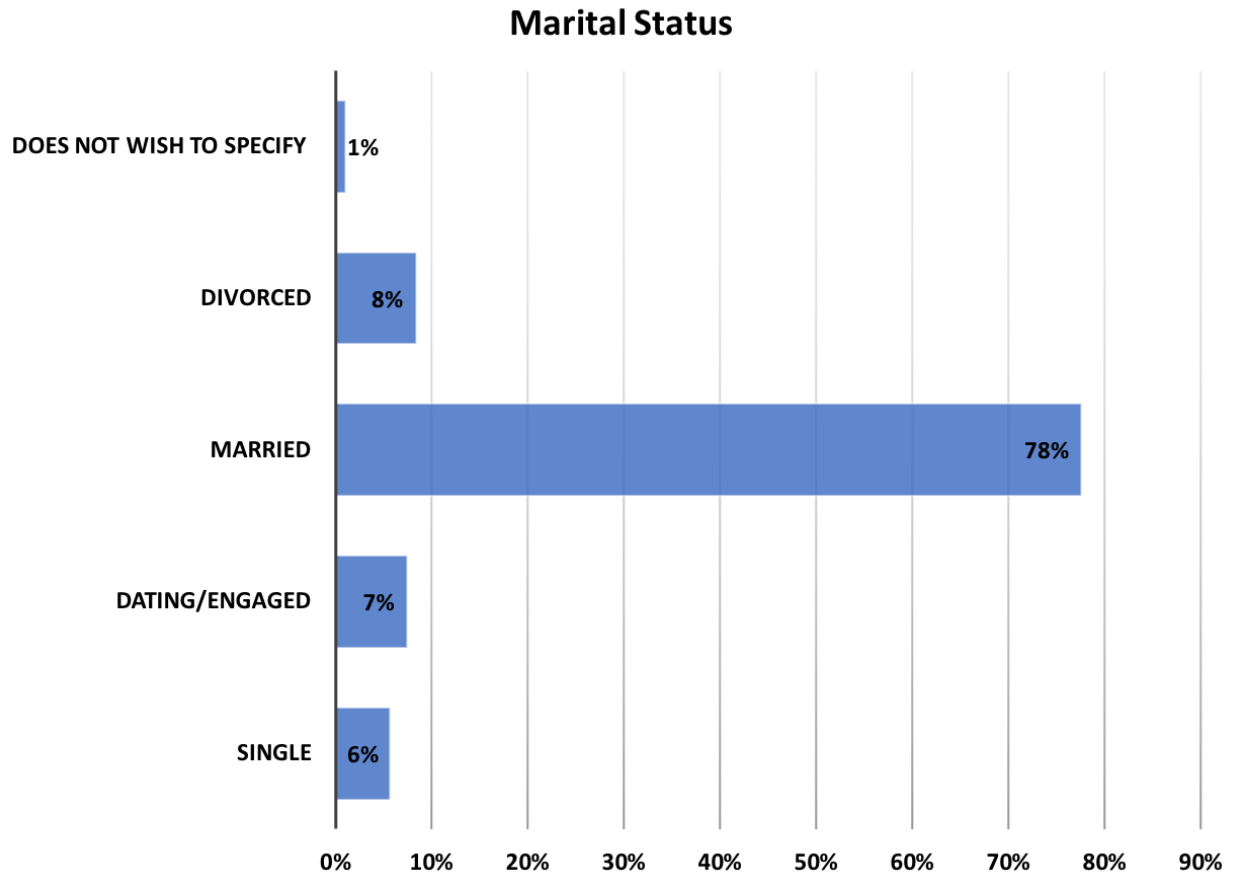
Rural – Fringe (41): Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an Urban Cluster.

Rural – Distant (42): Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an Urbanized Area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.

Rural – Remote (43): Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an Urbanized Area and also more than 10 miles from an Urban Cluster.

Appendix B: Demographics of Participants

Figure B1
Graph of combined interview and survey results



During the data collection process, it was initially deemed necessary to ask for the marital status of participants. This was done to take into consideration whether participants have a sense of support within the home when considering child development and their child's process going through a public education system. In particular, since most respondents were female, it was considered whether marital status provided a means of support when dealing with any potential educational related stressors.

As discussed before, demographic questions were collected at the beginning of the interview process. While engaging in the semi-structured interviews, discussion of father or male parental involvement came up throughout multiple interviews. In so few words, stated by different mothers throughout the study, their male spouse had very little involvement in the educational process of their children. Different reasons included: a) mothers wanted control of the process themselves, b) fathers had work or other conflicting priorities, c) they felt it was a women's job/the belief that she would take care of the matter, or d) felt the need that they had to be invited into the process before engaging.

These results tie into the gender gap witnessed within this study. The above numbers show that 77.57% of the 107 participants across the state are married, but most mothers felt like they were handling the public education situation alone. These numbers also might contribute to why only 6% of self-identified males participated in this study. Fix it, Jesus!

Appendix C: Demographics of Participants

To note in advance, all demographic responses represented in the Figures below only show results from questions that had indicated responses. Selection options that had no response, or a response of 0% were not included. Research represented below is still accurate in its total portrayal. Options excluded from the graphs held no value to the overall totals presented below.

Table C1
Data of parents ranging from 25-34

Parent's Age	Child's Age	Grade Level	Gender
34	5	Kindergarten	Boy
33	5 9	Kindergarten 4 th	Boys

Table C2
Data of parents ranging from 35-44

Parent's Age	Child's Age	Grade Level	Gender
40	Unknown	Kindergarten 3 rd	Unknown
40	Unknown	7 th 9 th 11 th	Girls
40	Unknown	PreK 2 nd	Girl Boy
42	11 13	Unknown	Girl Boy
44	9 11	Unknown	Girl Boy
40	6 3	Kindergarten (repeated) PreK	Boys
42	5 8	PreK 2 nd	Girls
41	9	3 rd	Girl
43	9	4 th	Boy

42	9	4 th	Boy
41	Unknown	7 th 10 th 3 rd	Boy Boy Girl
39	6	1 st	Girl
36	12	6 th	Girl
39	2 11 4 5 8	PreK 5 th PreK Kindergarten 3 rd	Unknown
42	2 7	PreK 2 nd	Girl Boy
44	16 13	11 th 8 th	Girl Boy
38	Unknown	2 nd 3 rd	Unknown

Table C3
Data of parents ranging from 45-54

Parent's Age	Child's Age	Grade Level	Gender
50	18 12	Unknown	Unknown
53	Unknown	10 th	Boy
46	Unknown	Unknown	2 Children (Gender Unknown)
45	11 9	5 th 3 rd	Girl Unknown
49	11 8	5 th 2 nd	Girl Boy

Table C4
Data of parents ranging from 55-64

Parent's Age	Child's Age	Grade Level	Gender
*55-64	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
55	Unknown	Recent Graduate	Gender
55	15	9 th	Boy

**Note.* Participant was asked if she wanted to share her age or have age range options. She choice to hear age bracket options and self-identified her age bracket.

Table C5
Data of parents unspecified

Parent's Age	Child's Age	Grade Level	Gender
*Old(er)	Unknown	High School Middle School	Boy Girl
*Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown

**Note.* Participant was asked if she wanted to share her age or have age range options. She instead said that she would like her age indicated as “Old (er).”

**Note.* The “Unknown” participant’s demographic questions were asked, but responses were not picked up by the recording. Information was also not written down as reliance was placed on recorder during this particular interview. This is an error on the part of researcher.

Appendix D: Parent Survey

Qualtrics Survey for NC Parent's Public-School Perceptions *Questions from parent survey, including logic flow*

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q21 Place of birth?

United States (include state below)

International (include area below)

Military (include information below)

Other _____

Does not wish to specify.

Q22 Gender?

Male

Female

Transsexual

Other _____

Does not wish to specify.

Q23 Education level?

No schooling

Nursery school to 8th grade

- Some high school
- High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent (for example: GED)
- Some college credit, no degree
- Trade/technical/vocational training
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Some graduate credit, no degree
- Master's degree
- Some professional credit, no degree
- Professional degree
- Some Doctorate work, no degree
- Doctorate degree
- Other _____
- Does not wish to specify.

Q24 Age?

- 18-24 years old
- 25-34 years old
- 35-44 years old
- 45-54 years old
- 55-64 years old
- 65-74 years old

- 75 years or older
- Does not wish to specify.

Q25 Ethnicity?

- Caucasian/White
- Hispanic or Latinx
- Black or African American
- Native American or American Indian
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Other _____
- Does not wish to specify.

Q28 Marital Status?

- Single
- Dating/Engaged
- Married
- Divorced
- Widowed
- Other _____
- Does not wish to specify.

Q1 Are you the parent, legal guardian, or caregiver of a current elementary, middle, or high school student?

- Yes

No

Skip To: End of Survey If Are you the parent, legal guardian, or caregiver of a current elementary, middle, or high school... = No

Q2 Is this student in a recognized North Carolina Public School?

Yes

Yes, not in North Carolina

Maybe

No

Skip To: End of Survey If Is this student in a recognized North Carolina Public School? = No

Skip To: End of Survey If Is this student in a recognized North Carolina Public School? = Yes, not in North Carolina

Skip To: Q3 If Is this student in a recognized North Carolina Public School? = Yes

Q5 Provided definition of public schools: a school that is maintained at public expense for the education of the children of a community or district and that constitutes a part of a system of free public education. Examples include traditional public schools, community schools, magnet schools, Montessori. After this explanation, would you consider your child(s) a student in a recognized North Carolina Public School?

Yes

Yes, but not in North Carolina

No

Skip To: End of Survey If Provided definition of public schools: a school that is maintained at public expense for the educ... = No

Skip To: End of Survey If Provided definition of public schools: a school that is maintained at public expense for the educ... = Yes, but not in North Carolina

Q3 Do you have more than one child under your direct care/within your household? (Biological, adopted, or dependent)

Yes

No

*Skip To: Q4 If Do you have more than one child under your direct care/within your household?
(Biological, adopted... = Yes*

*Skip To: Q8 If Do you have more than one child under your direct care/within your household?
(Biological, adopted... = No*

Q4 If yes, are both children in a North Carolina public school?

Yes

Yes, different types

No

Q6 If you selected either Yes options, please list the public-school models (ex: traditional, charter, etc.) that the students under your household attend. If you selected No, please list "N/A."

Q8 How much does it cost you for your child(s) to attend their current school?

A great deal

A lot

A moderate amount

A little

None at all

Other _____

Q9 Did your child relocate to the school in which they currently attend from another public school, private school, or charter school?

- Public school from in state
- Public school from out of state
- Private school from in state
- Private school from out of state
- Charter school from in state
- Charter school from out of state
- Attending their same school.
- Other _____

Q10 Do you know about the North Carolina School Report Cards (Performance Rating System)?

- Yes
- Maybe
- No

Skip To: Q11 If Do you know about the North Carolina School Report Cards (Performance Rating System)? = Maybe

Skip To: Q13 If Do you know about the North Carolina School Report Cards (Performance Rating System)? = Yes

Skip To: Q11 If Do you know about the North Carolina School Report Cards (Performance Rating System)? = No

Q11 Here is the link to the NC School Report Card Rating System. With the interactive map, you can narrow schools down by county, current year, grade level, and school type:

<https://ncreportcards.ondemand.sas.com/src> After exploring the website, can you now say you are more familiar with the NC School Rating System?

- Yes
- I'd like to spend more time exploring.
- No

Skip To: Q12 If Here is the link to the NC School Report Card Rating System. With the interactive map, you can na... = I'd like to spend more time exploring.

Skip To: Q12 If Here is the link to the NC School Report Card Rating System. With the interactive map, you can na... = No

Skip To: Q13 If Here is the link to the NC School Report Card Rating System. With the interactive map, you can na... = Yes

Q12 Okay, take your time. Move on when you are ready. You can save results of this survey and return later.

- I'll be taking that extra time while staying in the survey.
- I'm ready to move on.
- I'll take the extra time and return to the survey later.

Q13 Do you know the rating of your child's or children's school? After considering or looking up the letter grade, what are your thoughts on the rating of said school? Please elaborate.

Q14 By your understanding, what are the main components that determines the letter grade for the schools? If not sure, type "Not Sure" or "N/A."

Q15 Do you believe that North Carolina's school report card system is an accurate portrayal of the school's performance.

- Definitely yes
- Probably yes
- Might or might not

- Probably not
- Definitely not

Q16 What determined your answer for the previous question?

Q17 What are the main components that determines the school choice decision you make for your child/dependent?

- Location
- School Resources/Programs within the School
- School Performance Grade
- Word of Mouth/Reputation
- Mixture of all of the above
- All of the above
- Other _____

Q18 What percent of your parent choice is determined by the School Report Cards?

- 0%
- 1%-25%
- 26%-50%
- 51-75%
- 76%-100%

Q19 Do you have suggestions for other criteria that should go into determining School Report Card ratings? If no, type N/A.

Q20 If you could make suggestions for North Carolina public schools what would they be? (Does not have to apply specifically to your child/dependents school.)

Q27 Thank you for your time taking this survey. Any additional questions or comments?

End of Block: Default Question Block

Appendix E: Templates for Recruitment

Initial Template for Email Correspondence: Principals⁷⁰

Hello Principal [insert name],

My name is Tiffany Farr, and I am obtaining my Master's in Liberal Studies at Duke University.

For my thesis I am examining the NC School Performance Grade System and 1) How school administrators view this grading system, and 2) How parents interpret and use the grading system for school choice decisions.

For my research process I would like to do the following in **Spring 2020**:

- Conduct a one-hour interview with you or an administrative designee that you appoint at your school [insert name].
- Within the school, conduct a parent focus groups during after-school and also dissemination online surveys to parents (with a Spanish option as well) to determine 1) their awareness of the NC Performance Grading System and the process by which grades are calculated/determined, and 2) How/If they weigh that in consideration when considering school performance
- 1-2 day observation within your schools to further understand your school's ecosystem.

From the interview, survey, and observations, I hopes to gain further insight into 1) the impact of the performance grading system on schools and families, 2) the best methods for communicating/explaining school performance grades to families (i.e., what misconceptions about the grading system do parents have), and 3) whether other school variables/characteristics (beyond achievement and growth) should be considered in the grading system.

If this is something that your school might be interested in collaborating on, I would love to speak with you further. My contact number is **(803) 743-8417**, or you may reach me via email. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,
Tiffany Farr

Graduate Student
Masters of Liberal Studies / Class of 2020
803.743.8417 | taf25@duke.edu

⁷⁰ This template was originally created when the scope of the project included school observations for multiple days. Focus groups involving 8-10. In general, concepts of the project that ended up being modified in the final phase of conducting research.

Final Template for Email Correspondence: Principals

Hello Principal [insert name],

My name is Tiffany Farr, and I am a Graduate student at Duke University. I am currently conducting a research project that addresses NC public schools and parental perspectives of said schools. I have received approval to conduct this study with [insert name] County Schools, and I have also obtained IRB human subjects approval.

I wanted to reach out about partnering with [REDACTED] Middle for this project. Attached is a brief document that gives more insight into project details. If you have any questions, I am happy to provide clarification. Thank you for your time.

I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,
Tiffany Farr

Graduate Student
Masters of Liberal Studies | Class of 2020
803.743.8417 | taf25@duke.edu

Initial Template for Email Correspondence: Counties

From: Tiffany Farr <tiffany.farr@duke.edu>
Sent: Wednesday, December 4, 2019 3:39 PM
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: Research Project [REDACTED]

Hello Superintendent [REDACTED],

I hope you are doing well today. My name is Tiffany Farr, and I am a graduate student at Duke University. I am currently conducting research involving North Carolina public schools. My research is exploring the relationship between schools and parents. If you have a brief moment for a phone call, I would like to speak with you more in-depth about the project.

If there is a formal application process for research approval, I am gladly able to complete that process. Attached is my approved IRB human subjects protocol. I look forward to speaking with you more about partnering with [REDACTED] County Schools.

Sincerely,
Tiffany Farr

Graduate Student
Masters of Liberal Studies | Class of 2020
803.743.8417 | taf25@duke.edu

Final Template for Email Correspondence: Counties

From: Tiffany Farr <tiffany.farr@duke.edu>
Sent: Monday, December 16, 2019 8:44 PM
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: Research Project Proposal for [REDACTED]

Hello Assistant Superintendent [REDACTED],

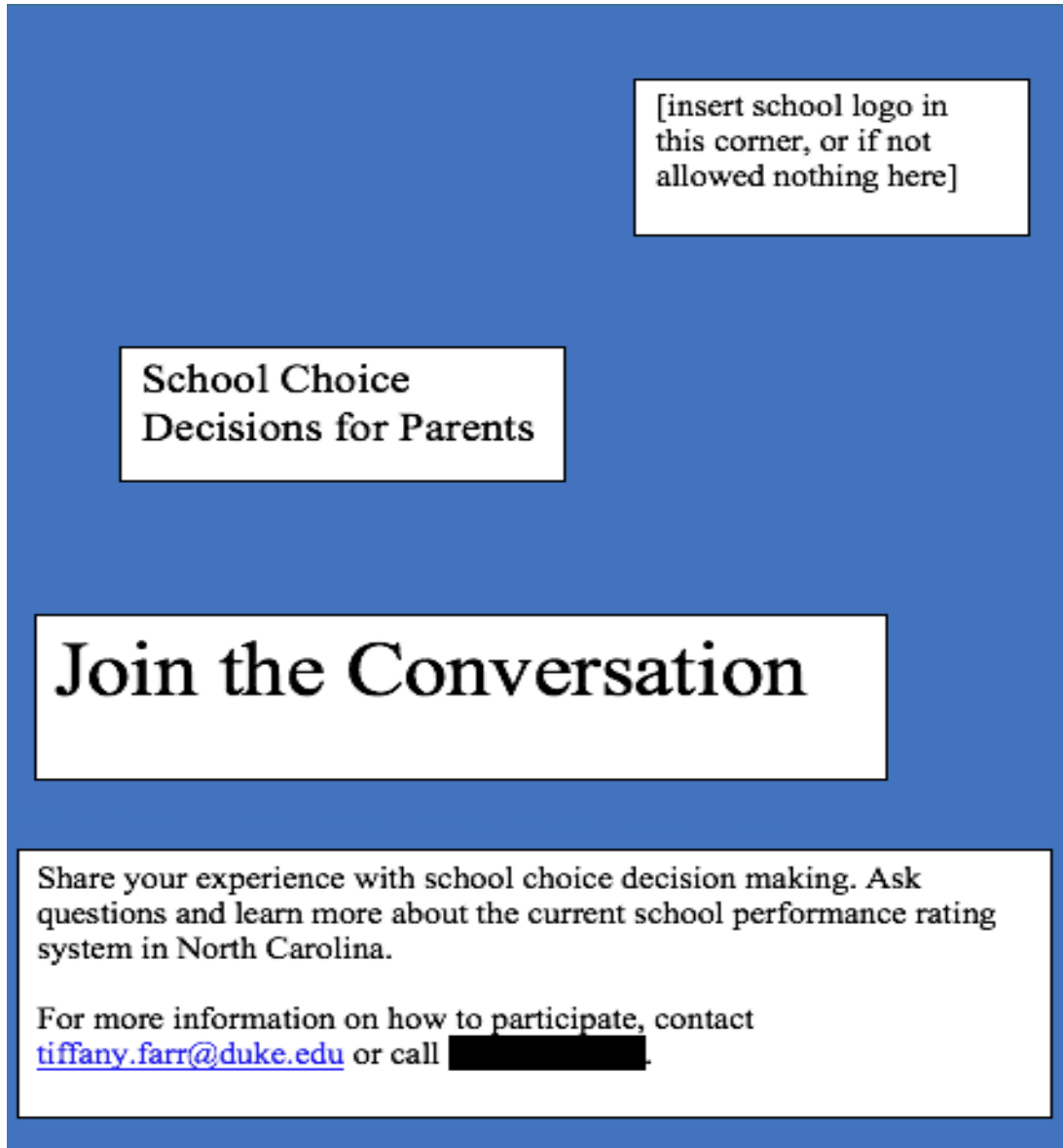
My name is Tiffany Farr, and I am a graduate student at Duke University. I am hoping to partner with [REDACTED] County Schools to conduct research concerning NC public schools and parental understanding of said school system. Attached is my approved IRB human subjects protocol.

I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,
Tiffany Farr

Graduate Student
Masters of Liberal Studies | Class of 2020
803.743.8417 | taf25@duke.edu

*Flyer*⁷¹



Newsletter Recruitment Text (for School Newsletters)

“If you are a parent/caregiver of a [insert school name] student you are invited to participate in a one-hour (maximum) focus group to discuss your perception on school choice decision making

⁷¹ When originally deciding the scope of this project, and accounting for conducting focus groups (did not end up happening), one idea for soliciting parent participation involved created flyers and sharing them throughout the area. The initial concept of creating a flyer was also had when it was believed that the research would be conducted in the immediate area. The county selected for this study was one and a half to two hours away.

and the North Carolina school performance rating system. This group will be limited to a maximum number of 8-10 participants, so if you are interested please call Tiffany Farr at [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] or email: tiffany.farr@duke.edu.”

Appendix F: Application Materials for County Approval

1. Purpose of Research

This research study is intended to address school and parent relationship building. This includes understanding NC School Performance Grades and how that may or may not influence parent perceptions of schools within their county.

2. Description of Study

To reiterate, I am interested in examining the NC Performance Grade System and 1) How school administrators view this grading system, and 2) How parents interpret and use the grading system for school choice decisions.

The research process for conducting the study:

- One-hour interviews, in-person or via Skype, with at least 4 XXX principals or designated administrators (2 elementary and 2 middle schools) from schools that represent varying school performance grades.
- Interviews with parents or participation in online surveys to determine 1) their awareness of the NC Performance Grading System and the process by which grades are calculated/determined, and 2) How/If they use the school performance grade in school choice decisions.
- 2-hour to at most 1-day observations within each of the schools to further understand each school's ecosystem. Understood that allowance of observation is determined by each of the principals involved.

From the principal interviews, parent interviews and surveys, and school observations, I hope to gain further insight into 1) the impact of the performance grading system on schools and families, 2) the best methods for communicating/explaining school performance grades to families (i.e., what misconceptions about the grading system do parents have), and 3) whether other school variables/characteristics (beyond achievement and growth) should be considered in the grading system.

3. Description of the Direct Benefit to the County and to the Profession

From reviewing the county's strategic action plan, I am drawn to the number one belief stated by the county: The education of children is a priority and is the responsibility of the entire community. I believe that knowing parent perspective of XXX will help schools address school performance ratings and its formula. This will give school administrators more tools to capitalize on their already persistent work of providing open and honest dialogue around wholistic school performance to parents. This will allow for greater parental understanding and allow them to be more involved with the community rearing of students.

By conducting this research, I also plan to address Goal 5 of the action plan which focuses on school climate. As an external stakeholder, my intention is to provide an in-depth case study report that will be shared with the County as a resource for the public schools. By giving

administrators more tools for communication between themselves and parents/guardians, then the mission of this research project will contribute to a better learning environment for students overall.

4. Involvement.

I would like to interview 4 principals (at 2 middle and 2 elementary schools) for a maximum of 1 hour each, spend a 2 hours-1 day observing/shadowing a designated teacher or administrator in each of these schools, and conduct a focus group with parents.

I would like to work with principals to establish a relationship with parents via a blurb within a school Listserv or newsletter. Interviews would be a maximum of 1 hour, Qualtrics surveys less than 30 minutes. If parent involvement is not permissible with the aid of school assistance, and if advertising assistance cannot be provided, I take full responsibility for obtaining parental feedback elsewhere.

Total time involved collecting research within all four schools will take 1 and a half weeks, in mid-late January 2020, early-February at the latest. All information obtained will be completely anonymous concerning all school system involvement (including County name), and all information collected from parents will be anonymous as well. Any and all information collected for this study will be stored in a secure Box folder and destroyed by the date of my defense: April 15, 2020.

Appendix G: Expanded Discussion on Teacher Pay

Most teachers will tolerate things that they should not have to, because they love their job. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that most teachers want to be stayers. Survey responses⁷² (Goldring, 2014) from teachers regarding Attrition and Mobility highlights data about “stayers,” “movers,” and “leavers.” Stayers are considered those in the profession that choose to stay within the education system. Out of 3,377,900 elementary and secondary public-school teachers, 84 percent remained at their schools (“stayers”), 8 percent moved (“movers”) to a different school but still stayed within the profession. In total, 92% remain in the teaching profession. Only 8 percent left the profession all together (“leavers”). By the vast difference in percentages, it can be assumed that educators do not actively want to leave the profession.

They just deserve to make⁷³ more money. It is hard to believe that for the amount of work that they invest, teachers can remain in a profession where the annual salary is \$60,483 (2018). The pay is lower for elementary teachers compared to secondary teachers (“Digest”)⁷⁴. However, this salary amount is provided by the NCES, and includes the accumulation between both elementary and secondary teachers.

The United States Social Security administration reports that the Average Wage Index (“AWI”) in 2018 for Americans was \$52,145.80. From this number it may appear that teachers are scraping above the national wage average by around \$8,000. Yet, average annual expenditures are relayed through the 2018 Consumer Expenditures (CE) Report which analyzes

⁷² Report from 2014, and the most current data analyzing survey results and responses according to NCES.

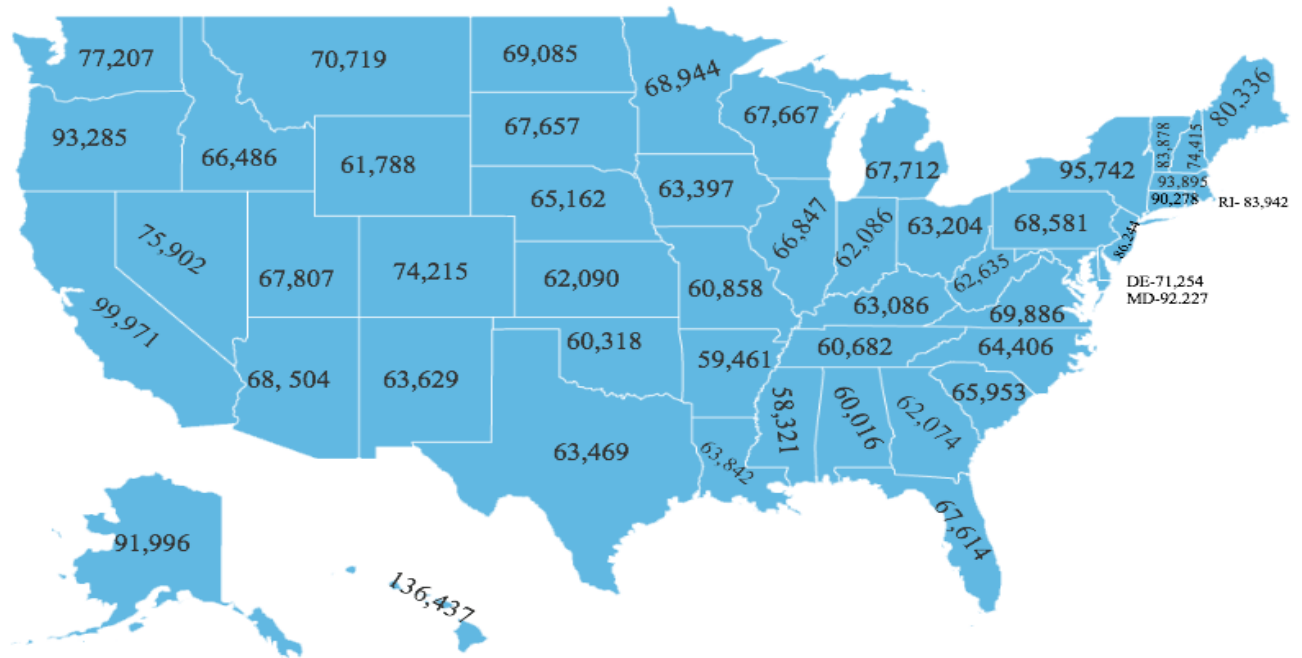
⁷³ More in depth numbers provided using the National Center for Education Statistics- Teacher Turnover citation in the reference list (2015).

⁷⁴ The number is insignificant when comparing elementary and secondary teacher salary. The graph provided by the NCES shows a \$200-\$800 difference in pay, with the secondary teachers taking a higher salary amount.

yearly consumer spending habits on a national level. This CE report produced by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics has an average expenditure dollar amount that provides a different insight into how far teacher wages stretch.

The annual expenditure for a typical American, per year, totals (“Consumer,” 2018) \$61,224. Expenditure amounts are growing by a 2.4% increase. Teachers can attempt to stay afloat, but their annual salary does not cover average expenditure costs. Their low salaries require teachers to make sacrifices when their salaries are not in alignment with average American expenditures or what they have to endure while on the job.

Figure G1
Annual Living Wage per state, by U.S dollars



As well as the numbers from the Bureau (Expenditures) and Social Security (AWI) information, people should also consider what defines a livable wage as determined by each state (Anderson,

2019). Indications from Figure G1⁷⁵ suggests that the average teacher salary would fall below a livable wage standard throughout most states in the U. S⁷⁶.

⁷⁵ Information calculated using the 2017 Consumer Expenditure Survey results and applying traditional expenditure costs to the Missouri Economic Research and Information Center's 2018 Cost of Living Data Series. Calculation method included: "The annual cost of each necessity and summed them up for total annual expenditure on necessities. Using the 50/30/20 budget rule, which allocates 50 percent of income for necessities, the study doubled the total annual expenditure on necessities in order to determine the "living wage" in each state.

⁷⁶ Exceptions include Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Mississippi where the 2019 annual teacher salary of \$60,483 is greater than those states livable wages.

References

- Anderson, J. (2019, July 25). This is the living wage you need in all 50 states. Retrieved from <https://www.gobankingrates.com/money/jobs/living-wage-every-state/#2>
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bastian, K. C., Akos, P., Domina, T., & Griffard, M. (2019). Understanding the allocation of student support personnel in public schools. *AERA Open*, 5(4), 1–17. doi: 10.1177/2332858419890322
- Borgueta, M. (2017, December). The psychology of ghosting: Why people do it and a better way to break up. Retrieved from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-psychology-of-ghostin_b_7999858
- Bridges, R. N. (2013, October). Ruby Bridges Foundation. Retrieved from <http://46679212.weebly.com/the-ruby-bridges-foundation.html>
- Campbell, K. E. (2006). *Pupil Assignment Act*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncpedia.org/pupil-assignment-act>
- Carnoy, M., Froumin, I., Loyalka, P., & Tilak, J. B. (2014). The concept of public goods, the state, and higher education finance: A view from the bricks. *Higher Education Journal*, 68, 359–378. doi: 10.2139/ssrn.2289126
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2017, January). *FastStats - Births and Natality*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/births.htm>
- Dorsey, D. N. T., & Roulhac, G. D. (2019). From desegregation to privatization: A critical race policy analysis of school choice and educational opportunity in North Carolina. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 94(4), 420–441. doi: 10.1080/0161956x.2019.1648953
- Dym, C. L., Wesner, J. W., & Winner, L. (2003). Social dimensions of engineering design: Observations from mudd design workshop III. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 92(1), 105–107. doi: 10.1002/j.2168-9830.2003.tb00746.x
- Garcia, D. R. (2018). *School Choice*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Gause, D. C., & Weinberg, G. M. (1989). *Exploring Requirements: Quality Before Design*. New

York, NY: Dorset House Publisher.

- Ghosting. (2016). In *Urbandictionary.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Ghosting>
- Ghosting. (2020). In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ghosting>
- Goldring, R., Taie, S., and Riddles, M. (2014). *Teacher Attrition and Mobility: Results From the 2012–13 Teacher Follow-up Survey* (NCES 2014-077). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Greene, J. P., & McShane, M. Q. (2018). *Failure Up Close: What Happens, Why It Happens, And What We Can Learn from It*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gross, B. (2019). Going the extra mile for school choice. *Education Next*, 19(4), 1–7.
- Hobbs, N., & Stennis, W. (1975). The futures of children: categories, labels, and their consequences. *Project on Classification of Exceptional Children*, 16(1), 3–44.
- Holme, J. J., Carkhum, R., & Rangel, V. S. (2012). High pressure reform: Examining urban schools' response to multiple school choice policies. *The Urban Review*, 45(2), 167–196. doi: 10.1007/s11256-012-0216-3
- Jackson, C. K. (2011). School competition and teacher labor markets: evidence from charter school entry in North Carolina. *National Bureau of Economic Research*, 1–40. doi: 10.3386/w17225
- Jolly, A. (2014, November 18). *STEM vs. STEAM: Do the arts belong?* Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2014/11/18/ctq-jolly-stem-vs-steam.html>
- Labaree, D. F. (2011). Consuming the Public School. *Educational Theory*, 61(4), 381-394
- Learning Policy Institute. (2017, September 13). *What's the cost of teacher turnover?* Retrieved from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/the-cost-of-teacher-turnover>
- Magnet Schools of America. (n.d.). *What are magnet schools?* Retrieved from <http://magnet.edu/about/what-are-magnet-schools>
- McDonald, J. (2019, May 10). *Brown at 65 -- No cause for celebration*. Retrieved from <https://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/news/press-releases/press-releases-2019/brown-at-65-no-cause-for-celebration>
- Meier, K. J. (1990). *Race, Class, and Education: The Politics of Second-Generation Discrimination*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

- Miller, K. (2011, May 25). *Book burning: North Carolina church to destroy "Satan's Books"*. Retrieved from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/book-burning-north-caroli_n_322214
- Minow, M. (2011). Confronting the seduction of choice: Law, education, and American pluralism. *The Yale Law Journal*, 120(4), 814-848
- Mitchell, B., & Franco, J. (2018, December 18). *HOLC "redlining" maps: The persistent structure of segregation and economic inequality*. Retrieved from <https://ncrc.org/holc/>
- Momodu, S. (2016, August 31). *The Pearsall Plan* . Retrieved from <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/pearsall-plan-1956-1966/>
- National Association for Gifted Children (2015). *2014-2015 State of the States in Gifted Education: Policy and Practice Data*. Washington DC: Author.
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (n.d.). *Digest of Education Statistics*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_211.50.asp
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2015, November). *Teacher Turnover: Stayers, Movers, and Leavers*. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_slc.asp
- North Carolina Bar Association Foundation Continuing Legal Education. (n.d.). *The constitutional right to a sound basic education*. In *Guide to Student Advocacy in North Carolina* (pp. 3–8). Cary, NC.
- North Carolina Center for County Research. (2017). *Basics of County Financing for Public Schools*. Raleigh , NC.
- North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2020). *The North Carolina Public Schools Statistical Profile*. Retrieved from <http://apps.schools.nc.gov/ords/f?p=145:1>
- North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2019). *Call to Action: Critical Actions to Realize Equity and Excellence in Gifted Education Changing Mindsets, Policies, and Practices*. Raleigh, NC.
- North Carolina General Assembly. (1996). Article 9B Academically or Intellectually Gifted Students § 115C-150.6. State Board of Education responsibilities. Raleigh, NC.
- North Carolina General Assembly. (1981). Article 31 The School Budget and Fiscal Control Act Part 1 General Provisions § 115C-429. Approval of budget; submission to county commissioners; commissioners' action on budget. Raleigh, NC.
- North Carolina Public Schools. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://publicschools12.com/all-schools/nc/>
- Rainey, J., Calvopina, J., Laura Temme, Esq., Maddy Tekka, Esq. (2016, June). *Compulsory Education Laws: Background*. *FindLaw*. Retrieved from

<https://education.findlaw.com/education-options/compulsory-education-laws-background.html>

- Riel, V., Parcel, T. L., Mickelson, R. A., & Smith, S. S. (2018). Do magnet and charter schools exacerbate or ameliorate inequality? *Sociology Compass*, 12(9). doi: 10.1111/soc4.12617
- Ryan, J. E. (2010). *Five Miles Away, A World Apart: One City, Two Schools, And the Story of Educational Opportunity in Modern America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sochacka, N. W., Guyotte, K. W., & Walther, J. (2016). Learning together: A collaborative autoethnographic exploration of STEAM (STEM the Arts) education. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 105(1), 15–42. doi: 10.1002/jee.20112
- Torres, E. and Weissbourd, R. (2020). *Do parents really want school integration?* Retrieved from <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2019, July 1). *QuickFacts: North Carolina*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/NC/PST045219#PST045219>
- U.S. Department of Labor (2019, September). *Consumer Expenditures 2018*. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/cesan.pdf>
- U.S. Social Security Administration (2018). *AWI series and underlying data*. Retrieved from <https://www.ssa.gov/OACT/COLA/awidevelop.html>
- Vilhauer, J. (2015, November 27). *Why ghosting hurts so much*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/living-forward/201511/why-ghosting-hurts-so-much>
- Wettach, J. (2017). *A Parents' Guide to Special Education in North Carolina*. Durham, NC: Duke Law School, Children's Law Clinic.
- What is the name of the school in x-men. (2015, September 6). Retrieved from https://www.answers.com/Q/What_is_the_name_of_the_school_in_x-men
- Winner, E., & Hetland, L. (2000). The arts in education: Evaluating the evidence for a causal link. *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 34(3/4), 3–10.
- Yin, R. K. (1995). *Applications of case study research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.