

FULFILLING THE PROMISE OF CHOICE

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN SCHOOL CHOICE DECISIONS MADE BY LATINO FAMILIES



Prepared by SocialQuest in partnership with The Piton Foundation, Together Colorado, and Stand for Children Colorado



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TOGETHER COLORADO, THE PITON FOUNDATION, AND STAND FOR CHILDREN COLORADO HAVE AN ONGOING COMMITMENT TO ENSURING THAT ALL STUDENTS, REGARDLESS OF BACKGROUND, HAVE ACCESS TO A HIGH QUALITY EDUCATION.

As Denver Public Schools has embarked on a comprehensive effort to provide parents with choices over their children's education, these organizations have remained dedicated to ensuring the process serves to give parents adequate information on all aspects of school performance so they can make informed choices. We remain concerned, however, that the families that make up the largest proportion of Denver's student population, low-income Latinos, may not engage with the school choice process in the same way as other segments of the population. To better understand how Latino families choose their schools, we commissioned the expertise of a researcher who specializes in studying the choices Latinos make. Utilizing a research design that included six in-depth ethnographies and six separate ten-person focus groups conducted in the spring of 2012, several themes emerged about families' current experience with Denver's school choice process:

- Participants view education as key and view involvement in their child's school as necessary to ensure their child receives the best schooling possible.
- Distance to a child's school is a significant consideration, especially under current transportation arrangements in the district.
- The process of choosing a school is often collaborative, involving the perspectives of key members of participants' social and community networks.
- Parents are often unaware of information on schools' academic performance, largely find the School Performance Framework difficult to follow (when they are aware of its existence), and do not typically incorporate academic performance from the Framework into their choices.

Based on these themes, we arrive at several recommendations for how Latino parents can be better empowered to use all relevant information in selecting their child's school:

- Comprehensive, proactive outreach through key community members and creative approaches are necessary to ensure parents understand and take action based on all relevant information. These strategies should rely on empowering parents, capitalizing on word-of-mouth information sharing, and engaging members of the Latino community.
- Parents are eager for more detailed information on transportation, extracurricular activities, and school performance information beyond what was presented in the choice materials utilized in the 2012 school selection process. In particular, the format of information presented must meet one of Latino parents' primary concerns: geographic proximity to home.
- Information about school academic performance needs to be made more accessible and presented more clearly to parents in order for it to be included as a component of parents' multifaceted decision making processes.
- Complex jargon and terminology interfere with the incorporation of school performance data into parents' choices and their willingness to consider the broad array of school choices available. Information on school performance and school descriptions must be presented much more clearly.

- Websites need to be simple and streamlined, with an easy-to-find Spanish language option. They also need to allow school data to be searchable using geographic criteria, rather than simply comparing schools against each other.

We applaud Denver Public Schools for its current efforts in providing parents with choices over their children's education and its recent changes in outreach strategies. In particular Denver Public Schools has, since this research began, instituted a new electronic SchoolMatch tool, improved the enrollment guide, employed school choice liaisons, and expanded regional school choice expos. To realize the potential of school choice and continue the positive efforts already underway, outreach efforts to Latino parents must continue to be improved to better meet families' particular needs. The district faces both challenges and opportunities in achieving the goal of providing parents with the tools necessary to find the school that best fits their child.



If we provide accurate school achievement and performance data to parents they will become better consumers of their education options.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

ACROSS THE UNITED STATES, THERE IS A GROWING MOVEMENT TOWARD PROVIDING PARENTS WITH GREATER CONTROL OVER THEIR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION.

School choice policies are designed to allow parents to take full advantage of the education options open to them, including sending their children to schools in different neighborhoods and schools that vary in how they meet the needs of students.

At its heart, efforts to increase access to public school choices is about empowering all parents, but particularly low-income parents of color, to align their particular needs and preferences with a school setting that best meets those needs. If we provide accurate school achievement and performance data to parents, so the theory goes, they will become better consumers of their education options. It follows that more transparent information would lead parents to both organize to improve their schools and/or choose a different school for their children to attend.

At a macro level, the results of these choices should create system-wide pressure for poorly performing schools to improve or districts and the state to make changes at those schools. The underlying assumption of this theory of change hinges on the belief that parents, especially the low-income Latino parents who make up the majority demographic in Denver Public Schools and who predominantly populate the worst performing schools in the district, are utilizing information on school quality and the tools that have been created to inform parents about their choices. This research challenges that basic assumption.

This belief that choice can promote system-wide improvement is seriously undermined if the most significantly impacted group in DPS is 1) not using information about school academic performance to either organize to improve a school or choosing out of a school or 2) if using it, not finding the information provided useful and actionable. There is a paucity of evidence that this process is occurring and, surprisingly, little research on how to improve it. This study seeks to address this gap.

While Denver Public Schools employs a robust school choice program, early indications suggest that lower-income and minority parents do not comprehend and utilize the options available through the school choice process to the same extent as other parents.² This is particular true among families of Latino origin.

The Piton Foundation, Stand for Children Colorado, and Together Colorado are committed to ensuring that all parents, regardless of background, have adequate and actionable information about school quality when exercising choice. To that end, we commissioned a study to explore how to further that goal. The question of how parents acquire and use information about school quality in their decisions is particularly relevant to the experiences of Latino families, a demographic who now comprises roughly 60% of the DPS population.

The goals of this project are to:

- Understand the information-seeking behavior, attitudes, and decision process of low-income Latino families in selecting schools.
- Understand the difference between more acculturated and less acculturated parents regarding their decisions over where to send their children to school.³
- Understand how Latino families currently experience the process of choosing a school and the role information about school performance plays in their choices.

- Determine what additional information parents would like to use when selecting a school.
- Explore how current school choice materials can be revised to better suit parents' needs.
- Develop recommendations for outreach strategies to better meet the needs of low-income Latinos during the school choice process.

To answer these questions, a researcher from SocialQuest⁴ employed a multi-method approach that included a review of relevant literature, six 150-minute ethnographies with acculturated and unacculturated Latino families, six two-hour focus groups of 8-10 participants per group, and focus group testing of prototypes of possible materials to aid in the school choice process.

Randomly chosen research participants were screened by SocialQuest, Together Colorado, and Stand for Children Colorado to ensure that they were not employees of Denver Public Schools or directly affiliated with any of the community organizations sponsoring this research.⁵ The ethnographic approach was designed to gain a deeper understanding of the behaviors and values of families as they relate to selecting a school.

The focus groups served the dual purpose of exploring the issues raised in the ethnographies as well as testing of possible materials that were designed to improve the school choice process. This multimodel approach not only allowed for a deep

2 *Evaluation of Denver's SchoolChoice Process for the 2012-13 School Year* Prepared for the SchoolChoice Transparency Committee at A+ Denver by Mary Klute, Buechner Institute for Governance, School of Public Affairs, University of Colorado, Denver, June 2012. http://www.aplusdenver.org/_docs/SchoolChoiceTransparencyCommitteeReportFinal6.12.12.pdf

3 Throughout this report, we use the phrase "acculturated" to refer to parents who primarily identify with English as their language of choice and have resided in this country for an extended period. "Unacculturated" refers to parents who primarily identify with Spanish as their language of choice and have spent less time in this country.

4 Monica Torres, Ph.D. was the principal researcher on the project. SocialQuest is a bicultural qualitative and ethnographic research firm with decades of experience in the field.

5 Additional screening criteria (Lower-income, Latino parents or guardians of children in specific grades) are available (along with the screening tool) from the sponsoring organizations.

exploration of how school choice decisions are made in the real world, but also created the opportunity for direct parent input into the development of materials that can improve the choice process. As organizations that recognize the value of bottom-up, community-driven action, we view the ethnographic and focus group process as an extension of our efforts to amplify the voices of those who are often left out of important policy conversations.

Our hope is that the results of this study will help districts and community organizations

1) understand how a specific group of potentially disenfranchised parents exercise choice and 2) develop materials and tools that will reduce the barriers that prevent parents from understanding school quality and exercising choice according to their needs and preferences.

As such, this study focused on three primary questions in the ethnographies and focus groups:

- 1) To what extent do parents use information on school academic performance when selecting their children's school?
- 2) To what degree are the current sources of information on school quality useful, accessible, informative, and actionable?
- 3) How can districts better meet parents' needs in a way that promotes their access to information on school quality during the choice process?

While this report answers these questions and others in some detail, the key takeaways are that:

- Low-income Latino parents seldom use district-provided resources when thinking of which school to choose.
- Low-income Latino parents face significant barriers to both accessing the information provided, as well as using that information when selecting a school.
- The information currently provided on school quality is often unwieldy and overly complicated for the average parent.

These findings suggest that achieving the long-term goal of encouraging parents to incorporate information about school performance into their decisions about their children's education will require significant improvement in both outreach efforts and in the type of information provided to low-income Latino families.



Exploring what factors drive choices for Latino families in DPS can help us understand how parents can better incorporate information about school performance into their choices.

INTRODUCTION

WHILE SCHOOL CHOICE PARTICIPATION IS INCREASING ACROSS THE COUNTRY, ADOPTION IS LAGGING AMONG LOWER-INCOME POPULATIONS.

Often, lower-income and immigrant populations are less informed than others engaging in school choice. Even those who are aware of school choice do not often take advantage of it, primarily owing to transportation difficulties. In one study, a full third of parents would have chosen a different school for their children if transportation had been provided.

In Denver specifically, adoption of school choice has risen to over 50%, from 34% in 2004. According to the most recent information available from the SchoolChoice Transparency Committee, 83% of students were able to get into one of their top three choices in the 2012-2013 school year.⁶ Despite this strong participation, there are notable differences in engagement levels across groups of parents and regions of the city.

The completeness of data reported on school choice forms is a cause for further exploration. It appears, for example, that the average form had only 2.5 choices listed when many more were available. Perhaps more concerning, these initial reports indicate that some families (those eligible for free or reduced lunch, Latino children, and those residing in the Northwest or Southwest regions of the city) all tended to choose lower-performing schools as their first choices.⁷ Exploring what factors drive choices for these families can help us understand how parents can better incorporate information about school performance into their choices.

6 Evaluation of Denver's SchoolChoice Process for the 2012-13 School Year, June 2012.

7 Evaluation of Denver's SchoolChoice Process for the 2012-13 School Year, June 2012.

FINDINGS

THE ETHNOGRAPHIES: PARENTS' EXPERIENCES



Latino parents do not just want their kids to attend the best schools for the sake of short-term happiness about the school environment or other available programs. Rather, the long-term value of a good education is well understood.

The six ethnographies conducted as part of this research provided the key foundational data upon which the subsequent focus groups were based. Researchers from SocialQuest met with three acculturated and three unacculturated families in the spring of 2012 to understand how they approached their decisions over school choice. Factors affecting parents' decisions are summarized below.

EDUCATION IS A LONG-TERM VALUE.

Latino parents do not just want their kids to attend the best schools for the sake of short-term happiness about the school environment or other available programs. Rather, the long-term value of a good education is well understood: education is seen as a ladder that allows children from less-advantaged backgrounds to have a better life than their parents had.

For acculturated parents who are more attuned to the value American culture places on education, the concept of education as a method of social mobility is self-explanatory. Less acculturated parents, however, often had a different perspective. In their countries of origin, education was often out of reach. For those who were lucky enough to attend school, there was often a need to suspend or terminate their formal education to help their families make ends meet. Parents with these types of childhoods have an especially significant emotional attachment to education and recognize they have a chance to provide their own children with an opportunity that they never had.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Documents introducing school choice opportunities can play into the emotional value that parents place on education by using language that taps into the narrative of the American Dream. DPS has already started down this path, entitling the 2013-2014 choice enrollment guide "I Have a Dream." Parents want their children to go to the best schools because it will mean a better job and a better future than many parents feel they had. Parents should be invited to take the lead in making sure their children receive the best education by taking advantage of the best options provided through the school choice program.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IS VIEWED AS ESSENTIAL.

Many parents, and public education advocates, believe that the only way to guarantee that a school is doing its best for a student is constant involvement in the process of holding a school accountable. Parental involvement is also seen as the only way to ensure that a child can get the individual attention needed to achieve that child's full potential in the educational system. While this is true for every student, it is seen as particularly the case for special needs students or those who need significant extra support.

At the same time, many parents did not feel that they were able to devote the desired time and attention to their child's school. Time commitments such as jobs and child care made parents feel that they could not be involved as much as they would like in their child's education. In many cases, the importance of parental involvement became a key factor in the school choice process. Parents would often choose a school that was nearby but had been rated poorly on the School Performance Framework (over a higher rated, more distant school) if they believed they could be more involved.

Unacculturated parents felt especially uneasy about their ability to be as involved with their children's education as they would like to be. In most circumstances, this arose from language barriers: there was often discomfort, and sometimes embarrassment, when faced with the prospect of having to interact with teachers or administrators who did not speak Spanish. More concerning, fears about immigration status often impeded the ability of parents to feel that they were allowed to be involved. In these cases, parents often relied on intermediaries such as friends and family, who either had documentation or spoke better English. Plans to improve outreach, disseminate school choice information, and promote parental involvement should take these particular obstacles into consideration.

KEY TAKEAWAY

The school choice program could be marketed as a way for parents to take charge and be involved in their children's education. At the same time, outreach efforts and full involvement of parents in the process are complicated by several barriers. Accounting for these considerations in outreach efforts, such as highlighting that immigration status is not checked when promoting informational events regarding the school choice program, will improve Latino parents' engagement.

WHILE PARENTS HAVE THE FINAL SAY, DECISIONS ARE COLLABORATIVE.

Parents and guardians of children may make the final decisions about the school choice process, but these choices are rarely made unilaterally. Rather, the decision-making process is the result of input from a variety of sources. Information about school performance, under current circumstances, is often less important than the input of family, friends, and community leaders. Community leaders are sometimes people who serve in an official capacity in organizations, but were often just other parents who had had more experience with the system and were considered valuable resources for more recent immigrants or those with less experience with the choice process. The importance of social connections in shaping parents' decisions underscores the need for saturating the community with advocates who understand the school choice process, the School Performance Framework, and the multitude of offerings that various schools provide. By empowering community members to be advocates who understand schools' academic performance and potential to fit the diverse needs of children, the district can help parents better align their preferences with their choices.

Current Sources of Influence

- Children are almost always consulted, but more weight is given to some children's reasons for preferring a certain school than to others. Where a child's friends attend school may not be the most relevant decision criteria, but the activities that a child participates in are definitely considered.
- Immediate family is usually influential in the choice as well. This was especially true if other family members were involved in raising the children making the choice. Older siblings who had previous experience were also heavily involved.
- Friends and community leaders were especially important sources for unacculturated participants who often had to rely on more distant connections for help in navigating English-speaking or government interface situations.
- Teachers and administrators were sometimes consulted and especially if they were Latinos as well.



THE ETHNOGRAPHIES: THE SCHOOL CHOICE EXPERIENCE

DISSATISFACTION OFTEN DROVE THE SCHOOL CHOICE PROCESS FOR STUDENTS IN NON-TRANSITIONAL GRADES.

For many parents who did not have to select a school due to the fact their child was not transitioning schools, the choice process was initiated reactively rather than proactively. When parents experienced enough dissatisfaction with the school their child or children were currently attending, they began to seek other options. As one parent noted, “In my case, I didn’t feel that the staff was treating my child well, and ignored me when I tried. Maybe it’s because we’re Latino, but that was a big motivation.” The nature of a parent’s dissatisfaction, in turn, closely paralleled the criteria that he or she would use when choosing a new school for his or her children.

Dissatisfaction often resulted from the child’s performance in school in terms of grades, but parents gave a wide variety of reasons for being unhappy with a school and seeking another option. The most frequent reasons mentioned were:

- Failure to adequately deal with special needs or learning disabilities.
- Dissatisfaction with unfriendly or culturally insensitive teachers or school administrators.
- Desire to separate children from influences that parents perceived as negative, such as drugs or bullies.
- Lack of opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, especially athletics and fine arts such as drawing or dance.
- Lack of sufficient attention to detail in terms of important tasks such as administration of medication or other needs.

Parents contacted a variety of sources when initiating the school choice process, but their primary point of outreach depended substantially on acculturation level and individual circumstances. More acculturated parents, as well as those who were more personally involved in their children’s education, would often go to administrators or counselors they trusted to ask about possible alternatives. These parents would take the initiative to do research online and find out about the school choice process through the school itself.

Less acculturated parents, whether owing to concerns about English-speaking ability or immigration status, tended to find out about the school choice option through resources internal to the community, such as extended family, other parents, or community leaders. These secondary sources would then refer parents to the proper forms for initiating the school choice process.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Parents whose children were not in transitional grades tended to seek out new schools when dissatisfied with the current school. For those who did seek out new schools, parents were often not aware about the school choice process until they learned about it from others. Proactive outreach can aid parents in incorporating information about school performance, geographic proximity, and other school offerings in selecting a school.

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE DATA WAS NOT A SIGNIFICANT FACTOR IN DECISIONS, AS IT IS CURRENTLY PRESENTED.

Once parents had made the decision to switch schools, they considered a wide variety of factors when deciding where to send their children, but school achievement data played only a small part in the overall decision. Many parents were not familiar with the available school academic performance data in the first place. Those who did know about existing data were aware of the School Performance Framework and the resultant color codes, but did not understand the components used to determine a school's rating and color code. The most knowledgeable of parents presumed that the data evaluations were based on state standards-based assessment scores, but most were not certain.

In general, school performance data was not well understood. The most significant way in which performance information was used was the color grade assigned to a particular school. As one parent noted, "The color-coding makes it easy: green, yellow, red. You can see which ones are better than others." In general, however, decisions were based on more personal and anecdotal considerations and were far less data-driven.

Both acculturated and unacculturated parents did place some value on the color code given to a school, as well as to the recommendations of friends, family and community leaders. Unacculturated parents, however, placed a special emphasis on transportation issues. Even if a school was rated better or had higher approval from family and friends, unacculturated parents were far less likely to pick a school that was further away because they were concerned that their children could not get to it easily.

Even in circumstances where transportation could be arranged, parents felt that they would be far less able to get involved in the school. Unacculturated parents often have transportation issues that are a greater obstacle than those of other parents because many of them are undocumented. This often limits their legal ability to arrange their own transportation as well as lessens their confidence in interacting with government institutions, including schools.



In addition to transportation issues, parents had many other concerns that complicated the use of school performance information in their choices. As a parent noted, "when it came down to it, my son ended up choosing. And he chose a school that was yellow, because they had the sports programs and the other one didn't."

Key among the other considerations are the same reasons that drove dissatisfaction with the local school in the first place, such as:

- Which school offers the best arts and athletics programs?
- Which school is the best for the individual subjects (math, sciences, English, etc.) that the particular child enjoys the most?
- Which school is the best at handling learning disabilities?
- Which school can be trusted to have teachers and administrators that understand Latino culture?



When presented with clear information on school performance, parents were more willing to overcome many other considerations and obstacles in search of a better school.

At the same time, when presented with clear information on school performance, parents were more willing to overcome many other considerations and obstacles in search of a better school. Outreach efforts and materials must address these concerns, but also must be designed in such a way that they highlight the importance of school performance as a consideration in selecting a school.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Currently, school achievement data are not a significant factor in the school choice process for many parents. Even where barriers to integration of data removed, other considerations often weigh heavily in parents' decisions. While transportation is the most significant of these issues, it is not the only one: special needs, extracurricular activities, and cultural sensitivity all play a big role in the decision process, and the sources of information for those considerations are often anecdotal rather than data-driven. Nevertheless, when the school performance data are explained in better detail, parents seem more willing to overcome these barriers in search of a better school.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIES: IDENTIFYING BARRIERS TO USING SCHOOL PERFORMANCE INFORMATION

AWARENESS IS THE MAIN OBSTACLE TO OVERCOME.

In general, but especially among unacculturated parents, access to and awareness of existing school performance information is a key barrier. Few parents surveyed were even aware that DPS published performance data on public schools. In the cases where parents were aware of existing data, the only publication mentioned was the School Performance Framework ratings. In many cases, the first time they had seen the information on school performance was when they received it together with the SchoolChoice enrollment form. Sometimes, parents only learned about a school's performance after a decision on enrollment had already been made.

Some parents acknowledged in retrospect having received the School Performance Framework ratings in the mail, but did not know what it was or how it might affect their choices at the time that they received it. Parents felt that mailing the school performance information to the children themselves, with a "carbon-copy" of sorts to the parents, would be a good way to get their attention as it would send a signal that it was an authentic and noteworthy mailing from the school district itself. As one parent noted, "I think I got one of those books in the mail once, but I had no idea what it was for. If it had had my child's name on it too, I probably would have paid more attention."

KEY TAKEAWAY

For school performance information to be a factor in parents' decisions, the right people have to know it exists. Parents often do not know school performance data are available (or fully understand this information) until they have already decided upon a school and many go through the entire process without seeing any data at all. Simply mailing School Performance Framework information to parents along with choice guides, even with revisions to increase the usability of the school quality information, will be insufficient. Increasing awareness of school performance will require being proactive: not just in terms of mailing strategies, but also in the form of informational meetings about the school choice process and the methods by which these decisions could be made.

EXISTING SCHOOL PERFORMANCE DATA ARE POORLY UNDERSTOOD AND NOT EASY TO INCORPORATE INTO DECISIONS.

Even when parents are aware of the available data on school academic performance, it is hard to understand and put into action for a variety of reasons. The most significant concern is that most performance data presented are written in complex jargon that is hard for parents to understand. As one parent highlighted, "Just reading the description the schools is annoying. Can they use plain English for this? I have no idea what this means." Rather than increasing trust in the data presented, the complex language makes parents trust the information on school performance less because they do not want to base decisions on something they cannot understand.

Even those who have a basic understanding of the School Performance Framework have a hard time understanding the components that make up the measure. The most sophisticated of the parents surveyed understand that it was at least partially based on the school’s performance on standards-based assessments, but without further clarification by the researchers it was often hard for parents to identify the other components of the School Performance Framework. In fact, the very term, “School Performance Framework,” was often cited as an example of the hard-to-understand jargon that made the data hard to understand.

Obstacles to understanding school performance information aside, the information provided is not always easy to incorporate into parents’ decisions. This difficulty stemmed primarily from how school performance information is presented. In most of the stimuli provided by the district — whether in print or online — schools were nearly always sorted alphabetically or by grade. But since geography was the main consideration for most families, it was frustrating that schools were not sorted by region to give parents the ability to quickly assess all the schools in a particular area. As one parent observed, “they have this thing where you can compare schools against each other, but I don’t even know what schools to compare because I can’t see which ones are where.”

KEY TAKEAWAY

Keep it simple! Jargon and complex terminology do not make readers trust the data; they have the opposite effect. If parents can understand the school performance information easily, they are much more likely to use it. Data on how schools are performing need to be sorted geographically. It is how parents expect to be able to use it.

EXISTING INFORMATION ON SCHOOL PERFORMANCE IS HARD TO FIND.

Parents who proactively search for information on school performance often have a difficult time finding it. During informal usability tests conducted as part of the ethnographic portion of the research, participants had a difficult time finding relevant online information about how to exercise school choice. These difficulties occurred even when lightly guided by the researcher. One parent noted, “I’ve been at this for about five minutes now, and I still haven’t found anything useful on the internet.”



When participants were able to find the appropriate information online, they found it very hard to use because of the considerations mentioned earlier. Not only was the terminology difficult to understand, but also the information was not organized in a way that made it easily actionable. Most parents found websites busy and confusing without easy access to school performance information.

In addition, they had a difficult time sorting schools geographically. Unacculturated participants had an even more difficult time: not only did they struggle with all the issues just mentioned, but on most websites, Spanish-language links were small and not easily recognized even when they did exist.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Promote sites with school choice information by associating them with the most relevant keywords. Make the websites less busy, with prominent Spanish-language links and ability to sort schools by geographic region rather than based school-by-school comparison. The very act of searching, finding, and navigating digital material was challenging for many parents. Empowering parents with information on how to use online technology in making their choices is essential. Digital tools, however, must be augmented with myriad opportunities for human-to-human and/or paper-based information in order gain better traction with families. The prominence of the “digital divide” was reflected in this work and, absent non-digital tools and outreach, we cannot assume that improved online technology will change parents’ use of information on school performance in their choices.

EXISTING AVAILABLE INFORMATION IS INSUFFICIENT.

While the information incorporated into the School Performance Framework includes many valuable measures, parents are interested in other details about their choices as well. When assessing the quality of schools, parents are interested in arts, sports, special offerings, and services for students with special needs. Parents expect that these pieces of information should be presented as a full picture of a school’s offerings and performance.

Furthermore, existing school choice guides do not clearly explain the diversity of options available. Parents are interested in magnet and charter schools as well as traditional schools. Unfortunately, the definitions included for the different types of schools in the guidebooks use complex language and jargon and are very hard to understand. As a consequence, parents barely begin to scratch the surface of considering these options because they are risk-averse. This often leads to the perpetuation of misconceptions about certain schools, especially charters, in terms of their accessibility for all students.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Inasmuch as these factors are measurable, information on school performance should be as inclusive as possible. In addition, more cogent and simple explanations should be provided regarding the diversity of school types available so that parents can understand and take advantage of all possibilities.

FOCUS GROUPS: EVALUATION OF POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH FINDINGS WERE SUPPORTED IN FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS.

Six separate focus group sessions were conducted in May of 2012 with acculturated and unacculturated families from Denver. Each group included 8-10 parents who discussed the school choice process, school performance, the information they use when making choices, and information they would like to have. In general, findings that emerged from the ethnographies about the school choice process, the importance of education, and difficulties encountered when selecting a school were largely confirmed. These focus groups also vetted a series of possible ideas about how to improve parents' experiences with the school choice process. Below are the essential findings from these discussions.

A CALL CENTER WAS SEEN AS A GOOD IDEA.

In response to findings that other parents in the Latino community were particularly trusted sources of information about school choice programs, focus group participants were asked for their reaction to the idea of an information center staffed by trained parents. Reaction to the idea was generally positive, especially among less acculturated groups who were more comfortable with the idea of being able to have a conversation with their fellow community members. As one parent noted, "having other parents participate would be a good idea. It would encourage other parents too, because one of the main ways children do well is if their parents are involved." More acculturated groups were also sympathetic to

the idea, but some were concerned that the parents in question may not have as much expertise in the subject, and wanted to ensure that they would be certified in some way to guarantee that they would provide the most accurate information possible.

Regardless of the existence of the call center, however, parents remained concerned that they would not be informed about available resources to help with decisions until they had significant need of them. They expressed a desire for a more proactive way of being informed about the availability of a diversity of resources to inform their choices. A series of community meetings was commonly seen as the best approach, with the consensus plan involving a series of meetings, some in English and some in Spanish, at different times so as to service the maximum number of people within the community.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Having fellow community members be the key providers of school choice information is a desirable idea in principle, but it must still inspire confidence. Parents would like to see an effort to train and empower other parents and community members to provide support and information to those engaging in the school choice process. Just as importantly, proactive outreach about the availability of a diversity of resources is a necessary component in this effort.

FOCUS GROUPS: EVALUATION OF PROTOTYPES OF POSSIBLE TOOLS

The six focus groups built on the foundations established by the ethnographic research. Exploratory questions researched during the ethnographic process were also explored at the focus group stage. In the months in between the ethnographic research and the focus groups, strategies and prototypes were developed for testing during the focus groups.

In addition to the ethnographies and focus groups, the scope of this research included the development of some initial prototype tools (based on the findings in this research) aimed at demonstrating ease of use and improving comprehension of achievement data among Latinos.

The initial prototypes tested during the focus groups were based on key findings from the ethnographic portion of the research and incorporated the following principles:

- Ability to target by geography
- Verbiage reflective of the collaborative nature of the process
- Visual representations of Latino families
- The importance of parental involvement
- Clear contact information in both English and Spanish

FOCUS GROUPS: PROTOTYPE REVIEWS

Prototypes were not very well received. In addition to the custom-created prototype, focus group participants were also shown potential images for a second prototype explaining the school choice system, as well as some existing publications also tested during the ethnography phase. These materials, however, all suffered from some of the same problems identified in the ethnographies:



- **Too much jargon.** The descriptions of traditional, charter, and magnet schools were found to be confusing and complex. The definitions provided were often incomprehensible to participants, leaving them no way of realistically determining which options could be right for their children.
- **Insufficient explanations.** Even though the prototype was designed as a general, overarching guide, participants still wanted more information. Merely asking one's teacher was seen as an inadequate response to why a school would be rated in the yellow or red categories. Parents were also curious to know exactly what it meant for a school to be "on probation" or "on watch," and how those ratings made procedures different from those at schools that were not in these categories. Unacculturated participants often did not understand what the letters meant in the school locations featured on the map, and wanted a clearer legend provided in that case.
- **Insufficient school performance data.** Parents seemed concerned about the completeness of school performance data presented. This was especially true of parents of special needs students, who felt that the materials hardly addressed their concerns.
- **Format.** Even with all the images, the custom-created materials were seen as very text-heavy, which can be intimidating for participants. Visual stimuli like graphs, charts, and maps were far preferred to written explanations.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS: MOVING FORWARD

While the research presented here provides a foundation for developing materials targeted toward the elements of the Latino community profiled for the study, further steps can be taken to confirm these findings, expand them to other segments of the population, and test further materials. Steps that could be taken include:

- **Further refinement of materials.** While the materials presented during this research represented a step in the right direction, further development will be needed to make a design that fully conforms to the needs of Latino families.
- **Quantitative testing.** While the anecdotal and exploratory data produced by qualitative research methodologies are useful for developing hypotheses and guiding the development of prototypes, large-N quantitative research can support the conclusions presented here. To confirm qualitative hypotheses, quantitative studies could be conducted among relevant populations regarding topics such as trusted information sources and awareness of school choice programs.
- **Web usability testing.** As part of the ethnographic research, participants were asked to try to find information on school choice on both the official DPS site and other websites. While the results were suggestive of how to proceed in terms of developing materials and refining sites, more detailed research could be conducted via web usability tests in order to better evaluate how visitors choose to interact with online information.
- **Research among other populations.** While the conclusions presented here speak to the needs of an important segment of the Denver school population, studies among other low-income populations could be conducted to ensure that the materials developed in response to research among Latino communities are applicable to other populations.
- **Testing materials in the field.** When further materials are developed, they could be distributed among the relevant population for utility and feedback. This would serve the dual purpose of introducing the information into the field while still using the materials for data collection.

APPENDIX

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