

Research on the Complexities of Education Choices

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Today, there are a number of education options available for parents to consider for their children. But as with any matter in general and school choice in particular, comes the challenge to parents and school administrators alike, of understanding those options. The purpose of this research project is to explore the complexity of the issue of school choice confronting parents and administrators. Section one of this paper will discuss school choice, and what is known about it. Section two will discuss the motivations of this writer for studying education options as well as potential solutions to the choice dilemma. Section three of this paper will discuss learning outcomes and a vision for future execution.

Section 1 – The issue of School Choices

This section will discuss a number of facets of school choice including the options students and their parents are confronted with, why school choice is and why it is perceived as being needed, and a few arguments, for and against, from the political side. This section will also discuss how some form of choice has existed for decades, the struggle parents have in determining the quality of their options, the results of studies regarding students, parents, and public schools, and common myths about school choice.

Today, there are many options students have to obtain a basic education, however, these options boil down to two categories. These categories from which a student and their parents can choose from are either the public schools exclusively, or a mix of public, private, and charter schools (Hsieh, 2001). The choices in the public school system exclusively include attendance at the local neighborhood school defined by one's place of residence, an intra-district school or any school within the district of residence, and an inter-district school or a school in another district. These schools may include a magnet school that specializes in some area like math or science, or a hybrid school known as a charter school, a school publicly funded but runs with less government regulation (Goldhaber & Eide, 2002), discussed in further detail later in this section.

A choice in a mixed school environment includes the above options plus private secular and/or private religious schools (Hsieh, 2001).

Charter schools are a recent addition to the mix of school options. They are usually instituted by a state body rather than a local school board (Driscoll, 2001) for the purpose of offering educators the freedom to develop and implement academic programs that meet specific predefined standards (Stewart, 2002). In doing this, they have an extreme amount of latitude in the methods used to achieve those standards (Stewart, 2002). Student ability to attend is based on some method other than residential boundaries, like lotteries, first-come first-serve, or past scholastic performance (Driscoll, 2002). Charter schools are usually smaller, have a student body more homogenous than the nearby public school, and their grading system and teaching styles are very non-traditional. Charter schools, despite their public funding, are run much like a private school and are not always enthusiastically supported by the local public school board. Performance wise, studies do not indicate whether charter schools are a viable option or not because nearly as many fail as succeed (Driscoll, 2001).

A possible third category of school choice is that of the home school. By its very definition, it requires a parent to remain home to perform the tasks of education. This is unavailable to most families due to the need for a dual income (Goldhaber & Eide, 2002). The parent also needs some aptitude for teaching and there is the added burden for the purchase of teaching materials. In the context of school choice as addressed by this paper, this option will not be discussed further.

Before discussing the various options of school choice further, one must consider why school choice is perceived as being needed. Other than government cash transfer programs, the education system is the largest publicly provided service which consumed 5.6% of the Gross National Product (GNP) in 1990 at an astounding \$305.6 billion dollars (Greene, Peterson, &

Du, 1999). The funding for education has increased significantly since then. The current system of public schools was created to ensure the teaching of desired civic and moral values, as well as economically useful skills to future generations (Greene, 2001). Studies can be found that indicate the condition of public education vary by region, but most indicate there are problems with the education system as it exists today.

Studies indicate that even though students in grade school are performing better than their counterparts a generation ago, by the eighth grade, students trail those from all other leading industrial nations. By the end of high school, students trail those of nearly all-participating countries (Peterson, 1999). So, while many students are doing well, many are receiving a sub-standard education (Van Dunk & Dickman, 2002). As many as 12% of students drop out either because of frustrations brought on by being too far behind their peers, or on the other end of the spectrum, frustrations from being bored from a lack of being challenged because they are more advanced than their peers (Stephen & West, 2002). Americans generally believe that the current education system is not equitable since school assignment is compulsory based on neighborhood of residence, and needs reform (Kahlenberg, 2001). Confidence in the public school system is dropping in the eyes of a public that has only increased its expectations of the very same system. Increasing costs and marginal improvements in student achievement suggest a system becoming less efficient, not more (Van Dunk & Dickman, 2002). For example, the desire for choice is so high that roughly half of all high school students in Chicago utilize some form of school choice to opt out of their neighborhood schools (Goldhaber & Eide, 2002).

On the other hand, because private schools usually have lower costs and thus are less expensive, many suggest they are more efficient (Greene, Peterson, & Du, 1999). Greene (2001) cites studies where private school costs often are half that of public schools. Parents also perceive private schools as having a more favorable class size, fewer discipline problems, better

resources, and better school-parent communication (Peterson, 1999). But what exactly is school choice and what is it expected to do.

Many writers, scholars, and education professionals have different definitions for what school choice is. Goldhaber & Eide define school choice as a "...policy designed to break the link between residential location and school attendance zones to reduce the geographic constraint inherent in traditional public schooling" (2002, p. 157). By implementing a choice policy and thereby embracing a market model, with students and parents being the consumers and schools being the supplier, competition and accountability will bring about greater efficiency in the education process (Van Dunk & Dickman, 2002). Quality will improve as schools compete for a limited number of students (Hsieh, 2001). The hope of choice proponents is that parents will act like consumers and send signals about their needs and wishes for their children. School choice may also reap academic gains as students migrate to schools that match their own interests and/or preferred learning styles (Goldhaber & Eide, 2002). Numerous studies have found that school characteristics can have a profound effect on student achievement (Greene, Peterson, & Du, 1999). By selecting schools that fit their needs, effective schools will benefit from increased enrollment. They will be able to expand their educational and extracurricular programs, add staff and decrease class size, and upgrade their technology (Powers & Cookson, 1999). The opposite is true for schools that decrease in enrollment and in extreme situations, failing schools may close altogether.

Obviously, this is a very politically charged issue. Depending on who is asked, school choice is either loved or hated. Those that lobby for choice include business groups, market theorists, policy advocates, religious and other conservative groups, and entrepreneurs who believe that the public school system is monolithic, rigid, unaccountable, and failing (Powers & Cookson, 1999). Those at the other end of the spectrum include the public school establishment,

the teachers' union, many school boards and administrators, some policy advocates, various liberal foundations, and academics that see public education as the cornerstone of democracy. These groups are less convinced of the possible benefits that a market driven choice program could deliver where education is concerned (Powers & Cookson, 1999). Both sides oversimplify an issue, whose research is infantile at best. Ironically, as the debate continues, conservatives regard the use of a regulated school choice tool known as vouchers, a topic discussed later in this section, as a means to make private schools more like public schools. Liberals are embracing choice to make public schools somewhat like private schools (Kahlenberg, 2001).

While formalized choice programs are new, choosing a school in and of itself is not new. Parents have made implicit choices regarding education for decades by moving into neighborhoods where better schools are located (Goldhaber & Eide, 2002). The problem with this arrangement is that choices are more feasible the higher the family income is. Either the family moves closer to the school of choice or provides the necessary transportation to the better schools. This not only applies to public school options, but with adequate financial resources, private schools are an option as well. For poorer families, however, options are usually limited to the neighborhood schools (Goldhaber & Eide, 2002). Vouchers are a tool recently created and hotly debated, that can be used to reduce the financial barriers that the poor have in obtaining better education options (Ferris & West, 2002), like tuition based private schools.

The success of a parent's education choice for their child depends on their ability to determine accurately the quality of a given school. While some parents may choose a school on the basis of non-academic characteristics like its location relative to their home, sports programs, social segregation, or in the case of some private schools, its religiosity, most parents place considerable weight on a school's academic achievements (Greene, Peterson, & Du, 1999). According to Hsieh, (2001), this was the primary motivation regardless of the parents'

background. Van Dunk and Dickman (2002) indicate that there is a great deal of consistency between what parents indicate they look for in a school and the data they gather. In other words, they are sending consistent signals on what they value in a school, and are considered better prepared to hold schools accountable at maintaining those values (Greene, Peterson, & Du, 1999). The percentages of parents who are informed choosers depend on the type of school choice program being considered. Some studies indicate that school choice programs where parents are sending mixed signals, where they indicate one value but fail to gather data on that value, will not be able to hold schools as accountable as those that are more informed (Greene, Peterson, & Du, 1999).

Getting accurate and unbiased data can be quite a task to undertake. Most studies center on student achievement to measure educational performance and many concentrate on benefits of one over the other without evaluating costs (Ferris & West, 2002). Often, the measurements are based on reading and math scores on standardized tests (Peterson, 1999). There are two research traditions commonly used when trying to evaluate school choice programs (Greene, Peterson, & Du, 1999). The first uses national samples to estimate achievement of public and private school students. Most of these studies find that a student's attendance in private schools will enable him or her to score higher on achievement tests and be more likely to attend college (Greene, Peterson, & Du, 1999).

The second research tradition uses more localized studies (Greene, Peterson, & Du, 1999). Goldhaber and Eide (2002) studied three of these programs. They are located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Cleveland, Ohio; and the state of Florida. They conclude that overall results of school choice are mixed at best and that choice in and of itself is unlikely to be the solution that revolutionizes school systems, particularly in urban areas. However, Goldhaber and Eide (2002) contend that the studies, with the exception of the Milwaukee studies, which have

mixed results, indicate there are efficiency gains, particularly with privatized education services. According to Greene (2001), no study has ever found that students are harmed by school choice.

The Milwaukee study was unique because it was the first publicly funded voucher program in the country (Greene, Peterson, & Du, 1999). There was such a demand for these vouchers that a lottery system was used for the distribution of available slots in the program. Since the lottery system made choice enrollment random, this contributed to making the Milwaukee program the first randomized study of its kind (Greene, Peterson, & Du, 1999). According to Peterson (1999), a randomized field trial (RFT) is considered to be more scientific. In the context of a medical trial, a control group taking a placebo is compared statistically to another group taking a real medicine. In this way, it can be determined if the medicine is having any effect or not. This is what a lottery does for a school choice study. Students are selected at random, not because of past achievement or lack thereof (Peterson, 1999). According to Peterson (1999), these kinds of studies are rare due to resistance of public school systems to submit themselves to independent evaluations and there has been a lack of leadership from the Department of Education to pursue such studies.

The mixed results in the Milwaukee analysis were due to a difference of opinion on which control group choice students should be compared to as well as how to control for the students' background characteristics (Powers & Cookson, 1999). Most school choice studies including this one, center on minority students because they are deemed to be in the most need for education change. Because of this, according to Greene, Peterson, and Du (1999), more gains are expected from this group than any other. These students are usually attending the worst of public schools, are usually from the African-American or Hispanic groups, from single parent homes, and their family is on public assistance in one way or another (Powers & Cookson, 1999).

The results of most studies show some interesting trends among students, their parents, and the school system. Generally, studies show that school choice increases stratification among students, and thus indicate to some, that more government intervention is needed. Stratification results from shifts in school populations as those students, from smaller and more educated families, or those from low-income families that get more government attention, more quickly adapt and benefit from new programs (Powers & Cookson, 1999). The Milwaukee study shows that, on average, choice students score higher on achievement tests than the Milwaukee public school student. Interestingly, even those that applied for a choice option, but were not admitted, also scored higher (Powers & Cookson, 1999). Increased achievement is not guaranteed, however, because as mentioned previously, parents may choose schools for reasons other than academics such as location, religious orientation, or extracurricular programs (Goldhaber & Eide, 2002).

Studies also indicate there are some trends for parents involved in school choice. These choice parents tend to be more involved in their children's educational process than that of non-choice parents and they also tend to have higher educational expectations for their children (Powers & Cookson, 1999). The trend was even higher for parents of private school students (Peterson, 1999). They are also more satisfied with their children's education experience. Choice parents tend to be dissatisfied with their previous experience with the neighborhood public schools, particularly in areas of discipline and lack of academic achievement. Choice parents tend to be more educated as well (Powers & Cookson, 1999). They are more likely to trust teachers and are more involved in the PTA and other volunteer work at the school. It is also believed that parents that are more involved with their children's schools may be more involved with their education at home (Goldhaber & Eide, 2002). Parents who select private school options tend to be affluent and white while African-American parents tend to make choices

within the public school options. Middle-class parents usually stay with the assigned public school. Parents in general who chose religious schools did so for religious or moral reasons whereas those that chose public schools did so for social reasons including location, safety, and special activities (Hsieh, 2001). Hsieh (2001) also warned that choice, in some cases, seems to bring about or build on “social, cultural, and economic segregation” (p. 91).

The few studies that exist on the effect of school choice on public schools indicate that they feel the effect of school choice, although depending on the viewpoint of the observer, it is not always positive for members of public school administration. Administrators must deal with parental threats to move their children to other schools for reasons not always academic. Superintendents reported the increased competition required personnel to focus time and money on public relations and marketing for their schools (Powers & Cookson, 1999). This certainly makes one question whether competition is stimulating academics as it is intended.

Despite all the studies, school choice has its share of myths, particularly with private schools. Many believe that private schools in general, and religious schools in particular, are less tolerant of those they disagree with and lack a willingness to engage in public speaking or unwilling to engage in community volunteer activities. Greene (2001) has found that the opposite is true. Students of private and religious schools were found to be more tolerant, even into their adult lives, than students of public schools. They also outperformed public school students at volunteering and public speaking and/or letter writing on public issues. It would appear that private and religious schools are more successful than public schools at instilling these values into their students lives than is commonly reported (Greene, 2001).

Even though different races have their preferences with regards to what school choices they make, to say that school choice creates racial integration is another myth. Studies by Greene (2001) found that private school students are less likely to be in homogenous classrooms

than their public school counterparts. Private school students are also more likely to sit in more racially diverse groups in a lunchroom as well. Lower tuition in religious schools makes this even more likely. Greene (2001) contends that vouchers will improve this situation further. In comparison, traditional public schools reflect the segregation found in their local communities despite the bussing efforts in many large cities. Magnet schools and inter-district policies do help the public school situation to some extent.

Another myth is that school choice will be a magic cure to the current problems with the education system. While students in a choice school environment do show incremental gains even at the start, true academic growth does not occur for a few years (Peterson, 1999). It takes time for students to adapt to a new learning environment and time for teachers to adapt to a new teaching environment. As the years progress, academic gains accumulate so it is beneficial to enroll students into a choice program earlier rather than later in the educational process (Peterson, 1999).

The last myth to be discussed is that choice programs take the best students out of public schools, a process some call “creaming” (Greene, 2001) and others call the “peer group” problem (Goldhaber & Eide, 2002). The implication is that public education will be left with students of lower academic ability when the talented students leave. As has been discussed previously, parents make school choice selections for many reasons. Many may send their children to schools perceived to have better academic performance in hope that their children will improve. It is also accurate to say from studies quoted earlier that the truly academically proficient students will move from public to private or religious schools. If vouchers are available, two potential outcomes may result. First, private schools could eventually contain a student body resembling that of the current public schools, particularly with vouchers thrown into the mix (Goldhaber & Eide, 2002). Parents will then no longer see a need to send more children to

private schools because academically, both public and private schools will be about the same. The second outcome is that after the student migration, the remaining student body could potentially have a more consistent student body with respect to ability. This would make the jobs of the educators easier and more effective by not teaching too much beyond or behind the majority of students in order to reach those that are excelling or are behind respectively (Ferris & West, 2002). This is an area that needs further study.

This section has discussed a number of facets of school choice including the options students and their parents are confronted with both public and private and why perceptions of public education has brought on the need for school choice. This section then discussed the politics, the struggle parents have in determining the quality of their options, the results of studies regarding students, parents, and public schools, and common myths about school choice.

Section 2 – School Choice Implementation

This section continues to examine the topic of school choice starting with a brief discussion of the motivations of this writer for studying education options and its relevance. Then the discussion over school choice continues with recommendations for potential solutions to the choice dilemma, building on the theme of better scholastic performance from increased parental involvement, whether it is directly with their child, with teachers and administrators, or in a volunteer capacity with the school in general.

School choice is of great interest to society in general and relevant to this writer in particular. This is because, as a member of a private school board, questions are often raised about the validity of school choice options and their impacts on children well into their future. A discussion fueled by current perceptions of public school failings, and the myriad of options available, public and private, makes for an interesting time to be involved in education.

The outcome of any educational process is not predictable in a precise way, particularly

on an individual basis. A child's educational performance is influenced by their individual interests and abilities, as well as by their parents, teachers, and peers. Some of these areas can be controlled or influenced while others cannot.

For example, parents cannot control the interests and abilities of their child. What a parent can control or choose, in some cases, is where their children will go to school. Whatever the school choice being considered, it is largely dictated by the economic power of the parents. School voucher programs are systems that can give a parent more flexibility, but the bottom line is that if a parent can afford tuition and/or logistics costs of getting their child to a better choice school, fine. But if they cannot, then the child will most likely be limited in their options to some form of public school choice, closer to home.

When parents cannot afford the tuition and/or logistics costs of sending their child to a particular school, they can still choose to influence their children, teachers, and educators by getting involved in the education process. In fact, any parent can and should make this choice. Involvement is just as valid a choice and has as much if not more profound impact as is where the child is physically sent to school. This will be the focus for the remainder of this section.

But what if a parent does not make the choice to get involved? Then most likely, their child is left to his or her own abilities to sink or swim, so-to-speak. The child may be lucky and come across that one teacher that influences him or her to achieve academically, but that is leaving a lot up to chance.

On the other hand, by making the choice of getting involved, a parent makes the odds of success far more favorable for the child. The more guidance and positive examples a child has with which to pattern their life, the more likely they are to succeed. The following pages provide more information on choices that can be made to better parental involvement.

As discussed in the first section, there is much confusion and misinformation regarding

school choice which parents must wade through. Parents must be diligent in seeking answers to their questions and concerns about the education options in their area. They must conquer the confusion that surrounds the selection of programs, selection of schools, and how best to deal with school administrators and teachers. Likewise, teachers and administrators from any school, are faced with the information dilemma when it comes to establishing programs, attracting students, and dealing with parents.

But regardless of the school choice being considered, whether it be public, private, charter or some other entity, parental involvement has been shown to be crucial when it comes to the successful education of a child. Unfortunately, there are opposing perceptions of the issues of involvement from parents, to teachers, to school administrators. As it turns out, according to National Council of Jewish Women's Center (NCJW, 1997), there are actions that can be taken by all three of the before mentioned groups to overcome this dilemma in order to better the educational experience of everyone involved.

The parent is in a unique position. There is no one else who is in a position more capable of understanding the needs of his or her child, than a parent. While a teacher is there for the children, and an administrator is there for the school, it is the parent that is there for "their" child. It is imperative that parents do their homework with regards to their child's education, and establish some level of involvement in the process, which can happen in a number of areas.

The unique position of a parent makes them, first and foremost, an ideal advocate for their child, that is, to act on the child's behalf in their best interests (NCJW, 1997). In doing so, parents should seek out support from teachers and administrators in helping with this task. For example, to aid in this process, teachers need to let parents know when their child is doing well, not just communicate when there is a problem. But when there is a problem, teachers and administrators should involve parents as soon as possible after it's emergence, to establish how

best to address the issue (NCJW, 1997). Parents then need to listen with an open mind, to the information about their child, which depending on the circumstances may not be news they want to hear. While a parent should be an advocate for their child, a parent needs to back the teacher up when the situation demands it (NCJW, 1997).

It has been found that once engaged, parents can assist positively in this process, because they often make known information regarding their child that the teacher and/or administrator is not aware of (NCJW, 1997). For example, there could be turmoil in the home due to a divorce, or a death in the family of a person that the child was close to. Then the teacher or some other individual in the school can give special attention to that child as needed.

The next area a parent should seek guidance on from their child's teacher is how to best help with homework and/or study programs outside of school (NCJW, 1997). Some parents are not clear on how active a role to take in this area. They fear that their help could be impeding their child's learning rather than helping. Other parents feel involvement at home is crucial and see themselves as an equal partner in the process.

Most teachers want parents to help with homework and generally wish parents were more involved in this area (NCJW, 1997). They indicate, however, parents should also encourage their children to work independently, thus building on the child's ability to be responsible. These values, as well as behavior and social skills, are areas that should be reinforced in schools, but be taught at home. Academics should be a school's primary concern (NCJW, 1997).

A parent should make sure their child understands how important their education is to the parent, and show respect for teachers involved in helping their child achieve an education (NCJW, 1997). Parents can do this by visiting the school, and supporting a teacher's decisions with regard to homework and special projects.

A parent should also set high expectations for their children, encouraging them to learn

and achieve. School administrators believe that parents need to assert themselves more in this area. They also need to better express the value they place on the expertise and professionalism of teachers and administrators (NCJW, 1997). Teachers often feel that they are looked down upon, especially in situations where their opinions contradict that of the parent and/or child.

Beyond direct involvement with their child and his or her teacher, a parent should become informed about policies and programs that promote parental involvement in their child's school (NCJW, 1997). School administrators and teachers also need to take the initiative here and clarify what opportunities are available and how this involvement has a positive impact on their child. This is because some parents, particularly if they are not currently involved, are unsure about how, or who, to contact (NCJW, 1997).

Most parents only attend school functions for which their children are involved (NCJW, 1997). Once a school makes contact with these parents, they should take that opportunity to build relationships by promoting other involvement opportunities.

Schools need to keep in mind, however, that many parents feel they are asked to get involved only when it benefits the school (NCJW, 1997). Fund-raisers are one example of this. When schools get feedback on other forms of involvement from parents, they need to be attentive.

Once parents become involved, many feel that their involvement somehow improves the quality of a school (NCJW, 1997). Some of the common opportunities available are volunteer work in a class, in the office, in the library, or through the Parent Teacher Association or PTA. Although extra curricular programs are popular volunteer programs, academic programs need volunteers just as much if not more (NCJW, 1997)! Parents need to keep in mind, however, that when they engage in volunteer work at school, they are there to help all children, not just their own.

In addition to volunteer work, a parent should step up to the plate and take any opportunity to be a decision-maker in their schools (NCJW, 1997). For example, a parent could form or join a team that tackles barriers to parental involvement in other areas. Again, schools need to be responsive to the input they receive from parents and parental groups.

At a minimum, a parent should pursue opportunities to communicate with their child's school, so educators understand what they like and do not like about the school's policies and practices (NCJW, 1997). Many school administrators wish they had more of this kind of feedback so that they would have a better understanding of the concerns and desires of the parents.

For any of the above categories, parents and teachers should consider that children should not always be relied upon to relay important information (NCJW, 1997). Children that carry written documentation tend to crush it, loose it, toss it, or just plain forget about it. Older children tend to shun parental involvement altogether. Sometimes, direct contact between teacher and parent is the best method. This can be done with a meeting at the school, at home, or over the phone (NCJW, 1997). Whatever the methods and types of communication currently used, improvements can always be made!

In general, parents need to understand that the school structure has not changed much since its inception, particularly public schools (NCJW, 1997). As such, they are expected to tackle ever expanding roles of social and mental services, in addition to their traditional roles. Likewise, teachers and administrators need to understand that the social and economic structure which the parents belong to has also changed, in some cases, drastically limiting the ability of parents to be as actively involved in the education process as they want to be. Both sides are strained to some degree by the changing times in which we live.

The difficulty with the process of education choice is with the extended time frames that

are required between taking an action and getting results. As stated in section one, it may take a year or two for a child, and the teaching institution, to adjust to each other. So results are not measurable until four or more years after an action is taken.

From an analysis standpoint, the real question is not how does a child do within two to four years after a change is made in their education, but how is their performance by the end of their high school education and on into college and life. This is a process of twelve years at a minimum. Many public school alternatives simply have not been around long enough for very many groups of students, if any at all, to go completely through the education process.

In a sense, this brings parents back to square one. There is not much data to go on and what exists is contradictory. It is certainly unrealistic for parents to have children in excess of twelve years apart, so as to learn from the mistakes, so-to-speak, of the former and apply corrections to the later.

So what does a parent do? In the end, each child is different and parents must use information available to them and guidance from educators, to specifically direct the education of their children. Studying the options, getting involved with their children, teachers, and schools are actions that can be started in days and weeks. Over the years, adjustments may need to be made as the child's interests and abilities are better understood. This aspect of parenting is a continual process.

There are a number of obstacles that can impede a parents involvement in school choice. The first to consider is the pace of life in today's world and the second is the increased difficulty due to the diversification of today's society.

An increasing problem for people in general today is the pace of life (NCJW, 1997). With schedules ever tighter between work and all the demands outside of work, this has become a substantial obstacle for parents to overcome. Whether they are investigating school choice, or

trying to maximize their children's education experience through increased involvement in ways mentioned above. Teachers and administrators recognize this as a problem for many, but stress that any involvement is better than none at all (NCJW, 1997).

In many cities with multicultural populations, increasing numbers of families, particularly recent immigrants, present language and cultural barriers to the process of school choice (NCJW, 1997). As stated earlier, communication between the parent and school of choice should be as good as possible in order to be the best benefit for the child. The lack of language skills or some cultural barrier on the part of the parents complicates the process considerably, even though many schools in areas that have this issue are able to support these parents as well.

This section has discussed the writer's motivations for studying this exciting and complex topic. This section has also discussed areas within and without the control of parents and the types of choices that can be made. For parents with greater economic power, the options of where to send a child to school are greatest because the economic barriers of tuition and logistics are easier to overcome. For parents with lesser economic power, the school choice options are narrower, if they exist at all.

For parents of either situation, they can still make the most influential choice of all and that is to become more involved in the educational process of their children. This influence can be exerted towards their children, in the form of being an advocate for their needs, helping with homework and study programs outside the school, and by expressing to the child the importance of education and respect for those helping in the process. A parent can be an influential force with teachers and the school by getting involved in volunteer programs, being a decision maker in the school, and by keeping the communication channels open as much as possible between the home and the school. Future scholastic achievement is difficult to predict. But the more proactive a parent is in the area of school choice, the better the chances are that everyone

involved will see greater success in the education process.

Section 3 – Personal Actualization

This section will discuss learning outcomes experienced by the writer. This discussion will include the relevancy and usefulness of this project to the writer and his ministry as well as where this project has caused personal growth. The vision for possible future growth will also be discussed.

The Bible says, "...wisdom is found in those who take advice" (Proverbs 13:10b, NIV). While it was not in the scope of this paper to seek advice from individuals personally, I have found knowledge and advice through the writings of others, and gleaned wisdom and understanding about this subject of school choice. Previous to researching and writing this paper, I had heard bits and pieces of the school choice debate from only a handful of teachers, administrators, and parents. Other information I had gained was from the political debate as presented through the mass media. That information was generally biased and laced with lots of sound bites and little substance, as is often the case in that genre. In general, I found while writing this paper that the problem of school choice is more complex than I had originally believed with more varied approaches and perceptions of results. I would like to discuss some of my findings.

One area that proved to be more complex than I had originally thought was that of the mix of school choice options available. My original perception was that the options were very cut and dry including public, private, and religious schools, without any understanding of magnet and charter schools. What I found as stated in section one, there are public schools, including the traditional neighborhood school, magnet schools and charter schools, plus there are private secular schools and private religious schools. There is also the option of home schooling a child, which was not addressed in this paper. I found that parents make school choice decisions based

on a number of criteria influenced by ethnicity and economic status.

While the results of the research on the perceptions of the traditional public school was no surprise, the performance trends and the major influence that parental involvement has on children's achievement were. I originally had the notion that student performance improved quickly depending on the school of choice regardless of any other external factors. In other words, a student's performance would improve simply by moving him or her to a higher quality school with better teachers. I found while researching this paper that that notion was not entirely correct. While it is certain student performance overall often improves by moving him or her to a better school, the results are very incremental and take a significant period of time to measure. As noted in section one of this paper, it takes time for the student to adjust to the new teaching environment which is often very different from what he or she is accustomed to, particularly when going from a traditional public school to a private school, for example. I also found that the improvement is not due to the move itself, but is due to largely to outside factors, particularly parental involvement. I was also surprised to find that those students with involved parents performed better regardless of the school choice.

Another area that was surprising to me was how diametrically opposed the perceptions are that parents and those in the educational system have of each other. Particularly in the areas of parental involvement and areas of responsibility over the child that each should maintain. The good news is that there is no doubt that the end result desired by each group, that being the academic success of a child, is the same. Since each group perceives the problem differently, the solutions obviously vary as well. Parents believe that teachers are the problem that needs to be fixed and likewise, teachers believe that parental involvement and support are the problems that need to be fixed. My original perception was that the teaching structure in the traditional public school was the sole problem and I was completely unaware of the effects of parental

involvement in the educational process.

The need for and the effects of parental involvement were perhaps the biggest surprises I encountered. It is unfortunate for everyone that so many parents are not involved with their child's education at home and/or at school. As was discussed previously, teachers want parents to assist their children with homework and special assignments as well as be involved in matters of discipline. I was surprised by the study that indicated parents had apprehensions about helping their children, fearing this help would cause more harm than good. Most surprising of all was that parental involvement directly in schools also has a positive effect on student performance. Possible areas supported by volunteer programs that fill critical needs are working as an aid in the classroom, in the office, in the library or through some other organization like the PTA. The results of parents being involved in the school are improved communication and respect between parents and educators, which many believe increase the quality of the school, the experience of the students in general, and their child in particular.

These areas of information including the complexity of school choice options, the performance results of each, the antagonism between parents and the educational system, and the effects of parental involvement are useful. This is because in order to be either an effective leader in education, or a satisfied consumer, one must understand all sides of the market, so-to-speak, the potential outcomes of the various options, and areas of potential concern, conflict, and improvement.

This project has allowed me to grow first by expanding my knowledge of the topic in the above areas. Just as one must hear opposing views of a subject during a debate to develop a fuller understand, I can now say that my understanding of school choice is improved by the examination of data and articles that were at times counter to my original beliefs. But this research did not only result in a better understanding of school choice, I also believe I am better

prepared as a member on the board of Cornerstone Baptist Academy, a private religious school. I now better understand why our school's teachers and administrators make the requests for support from parents in support of areas like academics and standards of conduct and their frustrations when they do not get that support. I also better understand the frustrations of parents on the other side of the school administrator's desk.

With this understanding, I can now look to the future. First of all, I need to decide what is within and what is not within my sphere of influence. That which is not in my sphere at present are the battles in the public school arenas.

What is within my sphere of influence is my ability to work with fellow board members, administrators, teachers, and parents at the school I serve in order to affect positive changes for all concerned. My first plan of action is to share the information in this research project with the school principle. He is central to the school organization and thus, more than any other school official, he interacts with more students, teachers and parents than anyone. No doubt, some of the insights he can gain from this project would be beneficial. As with most organizations, there are many policies and procedures that our school follows that are continued because they have always been done. Perhaps with a new perspective, these policies and procedures can be enhanced and applied in a more successful way. After all, sometimes it is a good thing to be reminded of how others perceive a situation on the other side of the desk. Later on, as forums present themselves, much of this information will be shared with fellow board members, teachers and parents.

Just as education is a continual process, so should my growth be. A large part of my growth as it relates to this project will be becoming a more active participant in my school's issues. But some of my growth will be beyond the education forum. I thought I understood school choice well before embarking on this research project but as I noted, I found many

surprises in the data and articles I reviewed. Before taking a stand on an issue by shooting from the hip and doing little research, I will take a step back and examine all the sides that I can. In ministry, as in life, there are areas that are not negotiable, but in those that are, the best position to take is an informed one. That is probably the most important lesson of all I have learned from this project.

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