

*A Survey of*

**MICHIGAN  
PARENTS WHO  
USE SCHOOL  
CHOICE**

BEN DEGROW



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# A Survey of Michigan Parents Who Use School Choice

By Ben DeGrow

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## **Introduction**

Nearly one in four Michigan public school students attended a different public school than the one assigned to them based on their home address, according to a 2016 MLive analysis of state data.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, 13 percent attended a conventional school district outside their home boundaries through Michigan’s Schools of Choice program and another 10 percent enrolled in one of the 300 public charter schools in the state. This rate grew significantly from 2011 when just 14 percent of students were enrolled through these choice offerings.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, more Michigan families are making use of their options within the public education system. But little is known of their motivations and experiences.

This report highlights the results of a survey conducted of Michigan parents who exercise some form of public school choice for their children. Among the diverse group of 837 parents from across the state who were interviewed, substantial majorities gave high marks to their chosen schools, said the experience boosted their expectations of their children’s future success and would likely recommend choice options to other parents. Respondents also said that information they receive from other parents influences their school choice decisions, in addition to published school performance data and in-person visits. Survey results further revealed that most parents highly value academics in making their decision, though safety and discipline are leading considerations as well.

## **Background of Public School Choice in Michigan**

Public school options have been available to Michigan parents for more than two decades. The state enacted charter school legislation in 1993, while the Schools of Choice program was adopted in 1996.<sup>3</sup> Charter schools are state-funded public schools that are governed by independent boards and operate according to the terms of a performance contract overseen by an authorizing body, often a public university. They are subject to nearly all the same requirements and regulations as other public schools.<sup>4</sup>

Schools of Choice enables state funding to “follow” a student enrolling in a school operated by a district other than the one where the student resides. School districts set local policies that determine whether they will participate in receiving students through Schools of Choice and can limit how many students they will enroll. Choices are limited to districts within the boundaries of the intermediate school districts that are contiguous with a student’s “home” intermediate school district.<sup>5</sup> There are two types of Schools of Choice encoded in law:

- ◆ “105 Choice:” refers to students who attend a nonresident school district but still within their resident intermediate school district.<sup>6</sup>
- ◆ “105c Choice:” refers to students who have transferred to a conventional public school in a different, neighboring intermediate school district.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, some ISDs oversee ongoing agreements that enable all families within the ISD boundaries to exercise choice among the constituent districts using a common application and enrollment process. Nearly all districts within these ISDs enroll nonresident students, though they maintain the right to opt out.<sup>8</sup>

## **Trends in Use of Choice and Previous Research**

The typical Michigan student who exercises public school choice is more likely to come from a low-income household and more likely to be a racial minority, compared to the rest of the state's public school population.<sup>9</sup> The gap between charter and conventional schools is especially pronounced. Seven in 10 charter school students qualify as low-income, compared to 43 percent of those in district-run public schools. Among charter students, one-half are African-American and only one-third are white, while their conventional school counterparts are 70 percent white and 14 percent African-American.<sup>10</sup>

A 2015 Michigan State University study using multiple years of data found that 54 percent of Schools of Choice participants received free or reduced-price lunches based on their household income. Choice participants were much more likely to be African-American (27 percent), but less likely to be white (65 percent) or Hispanic (5 percent), as compared to the average for the statewide public school population.<sup>11</sup>

The MSU study also identified a couple noteworthy trends regarding Schools of Choice participation. First, white and relatively high-achieving students are more likely to transfer from the lowest-performing school districts.<sup>12</sup> Second, while the most disadvantaged students throughout the state are more likely to use Schools of Choice to exit their home district, they are also more likely to switch back. One example of this phenomenon was highlighted in the study: Only 28 percent of low-income students who enrolled in a school out of their home district in kindergarten continued to use Schools of Choice through fifth grade.<sup>13</sup>

Limited research on Michigan public school choice identifies neutral to positive academic impacts. A pair of studies by Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes found that one year of attending a Michigan charter school was worth an extra two months of learning in math and reading, on average. About half the charters produced similar results as surrounding districts schools, while most of the rest fared significantly better.<sup>14</sup>

Additional analysis of the multiyear Schools of Choice data found less measurable academic benefit overall. There is "likely no discernible difference in math or reading test scores between kids who transfer using [Schools of Choice] and those who remain in their home districts," lead author Joshua Cowen wrote about the 2015 MSU study he co-authored.<sup>15</sup> However, a 2013 Mackinac Center analysis found that students are more likely to use Schools of Choice to transfer to districts with higher standardized test scores and better graduation rates.<sup>16</sup>

## Accessing Public School Options

Parents seeking an educational option first must know whether their child is eligible to enroll in a different public school. Unless it is a full-time online school, parents also need to figure out how to transport their child to school. To form effective policy, it is helpful to understand the current level of enrollment and access to publicly funded transportation available to families.

Public charter schools may not discriminate based on a student's beliefs, background or academic ability. A student may only be denied admission if the charter school has reached the cap for total enrollment or the enrollment cap for a specific grade, as stipulated in the school's performance contract. A charter school must use a random selection process if more students opt to enroll than space is available.<sup>17</sup>

Conventional school districts have greater discretion over whether and how they will receive students from outside their boundaries. Since no data is centrally collected, however, little is known about the specific limitations individual districts use to control how many and which students they will enroll through Schools of Choice.

To get a better understanding of how districts use Schools of Choice, between April 18 and June 9, 2017, the Mackinac Center collected information about Schools of Choice policies from 168 Michigan school districts in nine different ISDs.\* These districts combine to serve approximately 60 percent of the state's public school students. The rate of interdistrict choice participation in these districts is similar to, or slightly higher than, the state as a whole. For 39 of the 168 districts, nonresident students comprised 30 percent or more of their enrollment during the 2016-17 school year. Eight districts enrolled more students who lived within the boundaries of a different district than students who lived within their own boundaries.

A conventional school district's governing board may choose to participate in multiple types of interdistrict choice. In all, 161 of the 168 districts opened their doors to at least some nonresident students through one or more options, as follows:

- ◆ 127 used "105 Choice,"
- ◆ 106 used "105c Choice," and
- ◆ 31 participated in a local ISD choice program

Not all school districts are equally invested in boosting enrollment and funding through Schools of Choice. Fifty-nine of the 161 participating districts, 37 percent, indicated no limits on how many nonresident students could be admitted for the fall 2017 term. Six other districts approved only an aggregate total, such as Godfrey-Lee Public Schools, which limits its nonresident

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\* The nine ISDs are: Calhoun, Charlevoix-Emmet, Genesee, Ingham, Kent, Macomb, Oakland, Ottawa and Wayne.

enrollment to 25 students, or Grand Rapids Public Schools, which limits its intake to 500. Most of the remaining 96 districts restrict the number of incoming transfers by specific amounts at each grade level, though some districts also limit Schools of Choice participation to certain schools or specialized programs.

Despite their willingness to participate to some degree in Schools of Choice programs, districts do not necessarily make it easy for nonresident parents to apply and enroll. Of the 161 participating districts, one-quarter of them failed to post or link to an easy-to-find nonresident enrollment application on their website and 14 had no information about Schools of Choice enrollment online at all.

The lack of helpful information about schools can pose a barrier for families desiring to exercise choice. One in four Detroit parents surveyed in 2014 by the Center on Reinventing Public Education said they were unable to get needed information. Additionally, 35 percent of the 500 parents in Detroit admitted to being held back by their own confusion about whether their student was eligible to attend a particular school.<sup>18</sup>

Nearly 30 percent of Detroit parents in the 2014 CRPE survey said finding transportation to and from school represented a barrier to choice. About 70 percent of Detroit parents who use school choice either drive or let their kids walk to school, as opposed to taking the school bus or riding public transit.\*

Further, Michigan school districts are not required by law to provide student transportation, no matter if the students are residents or nonresidents. In its recent survey, the Mackinac Center identified Schools of Choice transportation policies for 130 of the 161 participating districts. But only 21 of these 130 districts, 16 percent, stipulate that transportation is available for nonresident students from an existing stop and only “if room is available.” Four other districts provide transportation on some other limited basis. Most districts’ policy is to leave it entirely to nonresident families to find a way to transport their children to school.

Parents who select a public charter school may fare a little better in finding help to get their child to and from classes each day. But an exact number of Michigan charters that provide student transportation is not known. A look at 2016 student transportation expenditure data, however, suggests that most charters do not provide these services. The median charter school spent about

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\* The other cities in the analysis were Baltimore, Cleveland, Denver, Indianapolis, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. Ashley Jochim et al., “How Parents Experience Public School Choice” (Center on Reinventing Public Education, Dec. 2014), 20, <https://perma.cc/F4PJ-L6GE>.

\$30 per pupil on student transportation services, about 15 times less than the median conventional district.\*

## Results of Parent Survey

The Mackinac Center for Public Policy commissioned a survey of Michigan parents who exercise public school choice. In May and June of 2017, a total of 837 parents were surveyed by telephone.† Respondents were made up of a diverse cross-section of families who currently enroll their children in public charter schools or in conventional public schools outside their district of residence.‡ As the primary day-to-day users of these educational options, their insights into their experiences are important for policymakers and other influencers to consider.

The survey gauged parent satisfaction with their public school choices in three ways. First, respondents were asked to grade their child's current school of choice. The result reflects an observed phenomenon that parents are somewhat more satisfied with a school of their choosing than an assigned school.<sup>19</sup> Half of respondents rated their school of choice an A and another 30 percent gave their school a B. As a comparison, only 62 percent of parents of school-aged children nationwide give their local public schools an A or B.<sup>§</sup> A nearly identical share of Michigan's general voting population shared that assessment, as measured by a 2016 Mackinac Center survey.<sup>20</sup> The rate of parents using choice who assign their school a failing grade matches the rate assigned by Michigan voters more generally, and by all parents nationally.

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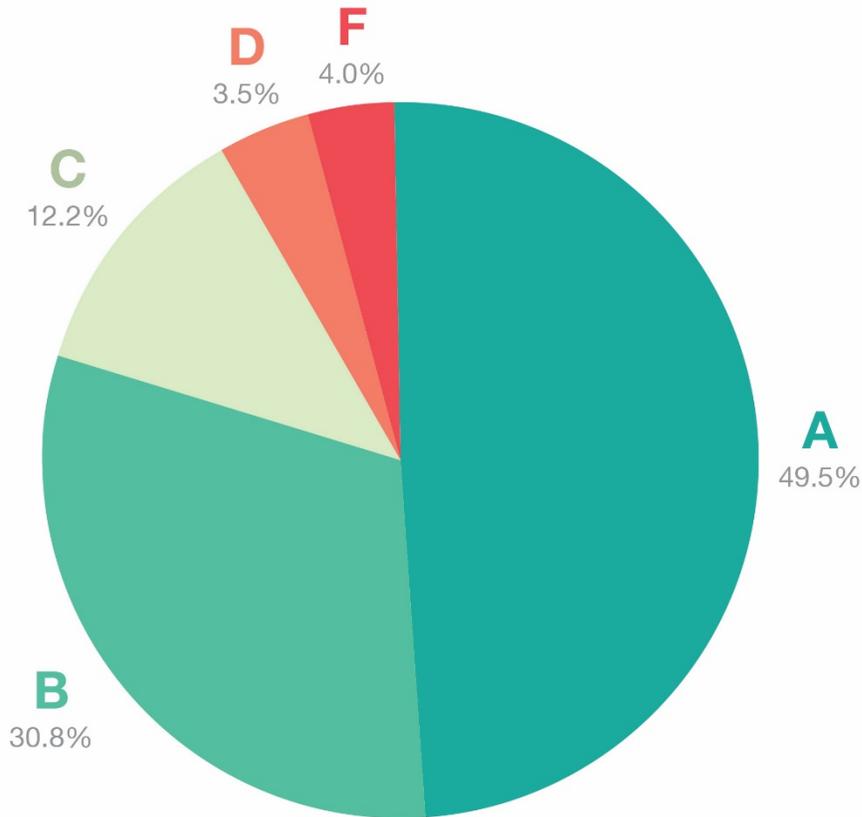
\* Author's calculations based on data from the National Public Education Finance Survey. It is worth noting that a small but significant number of charter schools do provide some form of student transportation services. Out of 301 charters, only 47 spent more on student transportation than the median conventional district (roughly \$450 per pupil).

† The 837 survey respondents identified racially as follows: 69.1 percent Caucasian, 23.4 percent African-American, 3.8 percent Asian and 3.6 percent Hispanic. The sample was also nearly evenly divided among four annual household income brackets: less than \$25,000 (25.1 percent), \$25,000-\$74,999 (26.5 percent), \$75,000-\$150,000 (24.3 percent), and over \$150,000 (24.1 percent). The 837 respondents resided in 106 different Michigan school districts. Of the 106 districts, 69 were part of the 168 districts studied for current SOC practices. Five hundred (60 percent) of the 837 respondents came from those 69 districts.

‡ Due to an error in survey data collection (and possible confusion among some respondents), useful distinctions between charter and Schools of Choice parents could not be made. Some charter parents aren't aware that their school is indeed a charter school. However, there is a clear self-recognition among parents who have made an active choice not to attend their assigned neighborhood school.

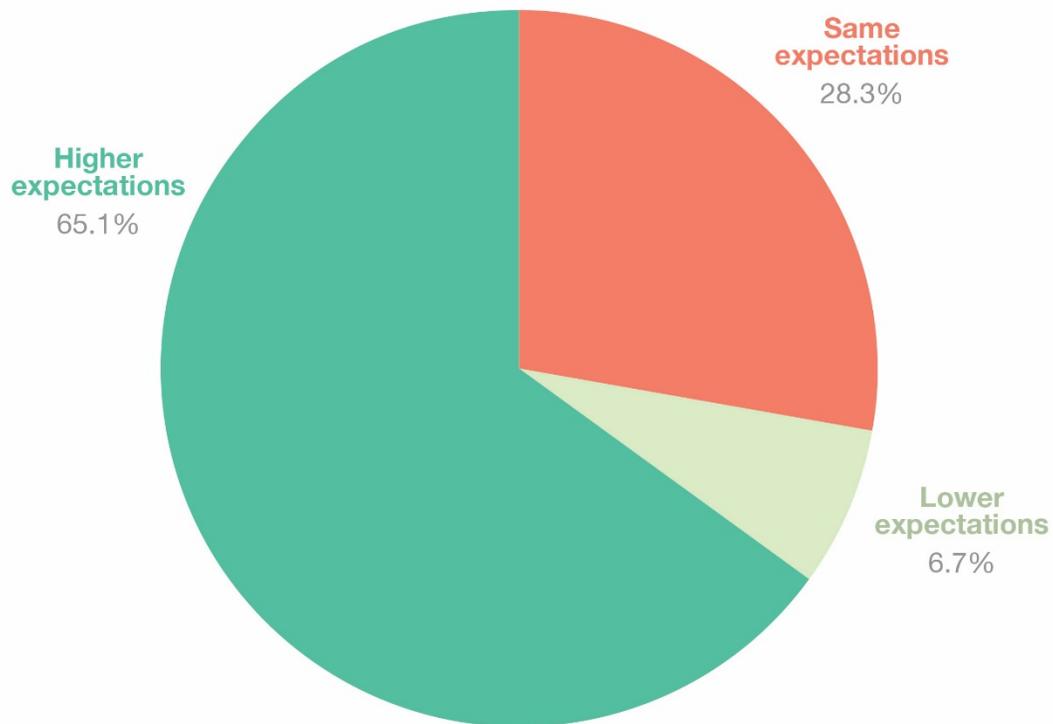
§ In the 2017 *Education Next* survey, 62 percent of 2,170 parents interviewed assigned an A or B grade to their local schools. A Phi Delta Kappan poll released in 2017 revealed 71 percent of self-identified public school parents made the same assessment of their oldest child's school. Martin R. West et al., "The 2017 EdNext Poll on School Reform," *Education Next* 18, no. 1 (2018), <https://perma.cc/AC2L-RQF2>; "The 49th Annual PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools" (Phi Delta Kappan, Sept. 2017), <https://perma.cc/HG7U-LSTW>.

**Graphic 1: What Grade Would You Give the Overall Quality of the School Your Child Currently Attends?**



Second, Michigan parents exercising public school choice rated their expectations of their child’s educational attainment. The survey question asked: “Overall, how has your experience with public school choice affected how far you expect your child to go in his or her education?” In response to this question, 65 percent said choice has helped increase their hopes and expectations. Of the remainder, four times as many (28 percent) indicated no difference in expectations compared to those who said it had lowered their expectations (7 percent). African-American parents and parents in households that earn less than \$25,000 a year were more likely to report a positive result compared to other respondents.

**Graphic 2: Overall, How Has Your Experience with Public School Choice Affected How Far You Expect Your Child to go in His or Her Education?**

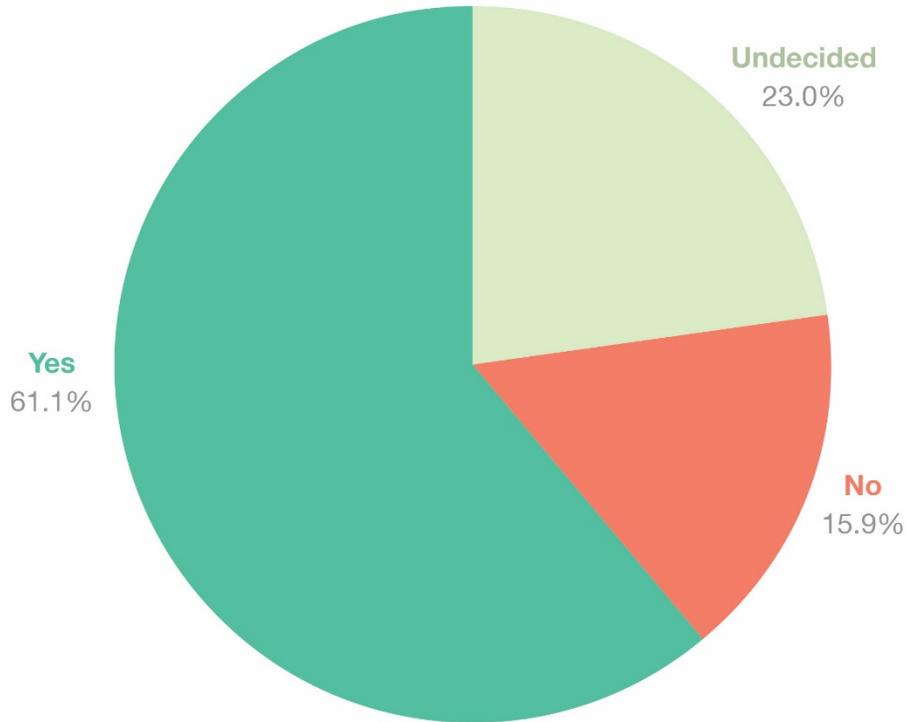


A third survey question asked respondents whether they would recommend to other parents that they participate in a public school choice option. About 61 percent said “yes,” compared with 16 percent who said “no.” The rest were undecided. Survey respondents’ overall positive levels of satisfaction matches up with more extensive findings of charter school parents at the national level.\*

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\* See Samuel Barrows, Paul E. Peterson and Martin R. West, “What Do Parents Think of Their Children’s Schools,” *Education Next* 17, no. 2 (2017), <https://perma.cc/W3SD-V6CN>. Analyzing a sample of 1,571 parent responses to the 2016 Education Next survey, the authors identified charter school parents as being significantly more satisfied than district-school parents on six of eight key school characteristics: teacher quality, school discipline, expectations for student achievement, safety, values instruction and racial or ethnic diversity. On the other two characteristics, school location and school facilities, satisfaction levels were statistically similar.

**Graphic 3: Based on Your Experiences with School Choice, How Likely are You to Recommend School Choice to Other Parents?**

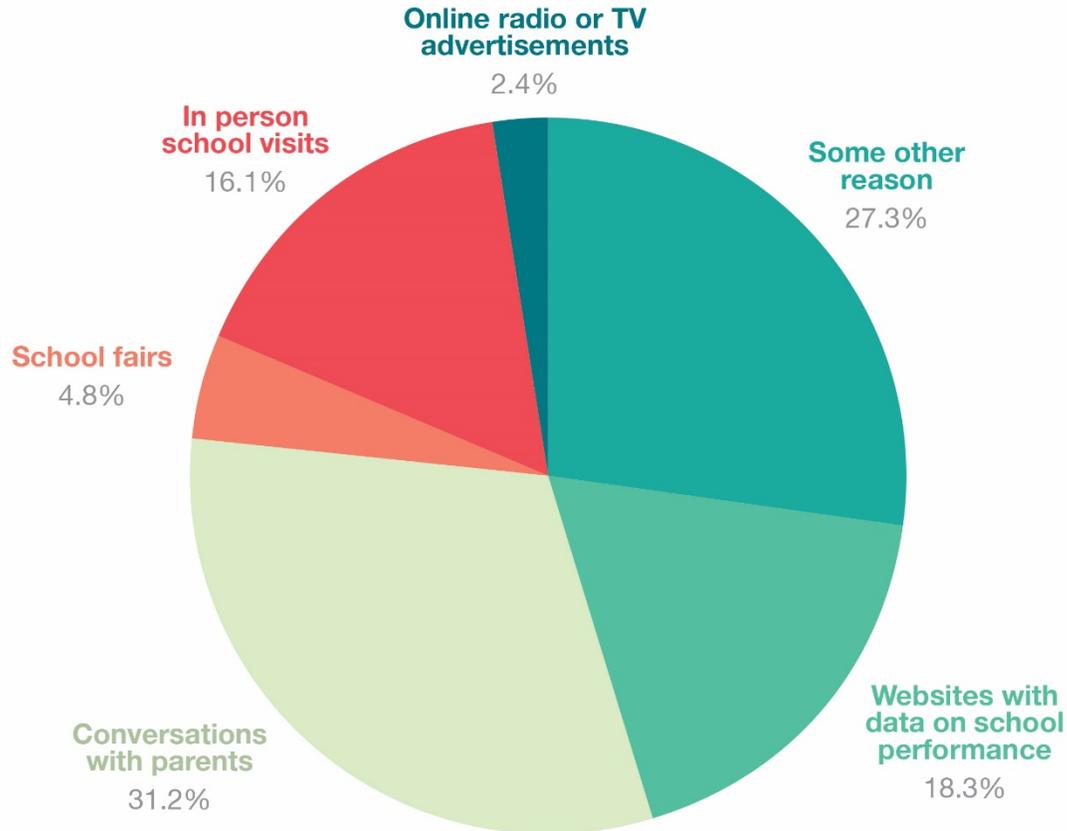


Survey respondents also shed more light on the factors that motivated them to participate in a school choice program and that informed and influenced their decision. Six possibilities were presented as candidates for “the most important [factor] in helping you make the best possible decision about selecting a school.” Overall, the leading answer provided by 31 percent was conversations with other parents.\* African-Americans and Asian-Americans also put a great deal of stock in websites containing school performance data. A small but significant number of parents credited an in-person visit to the school or meeting with school leaders as a decisive factor. School fairs and online or broadcast advertisements rated as the least influential ways to gather useful information, according to these parents.

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\* A 2011 survey of Detroit parents produced a similar finding. Respondents most commonly listed their networks of family and friends as information sources for school selection. Thomas Stewart and Patrick J. Wolf, “Understanding School Shoppers in Detroit” (Michigan Future Inc., Feb. 2012), <https://perma.cc/GC4U-39ZD>.

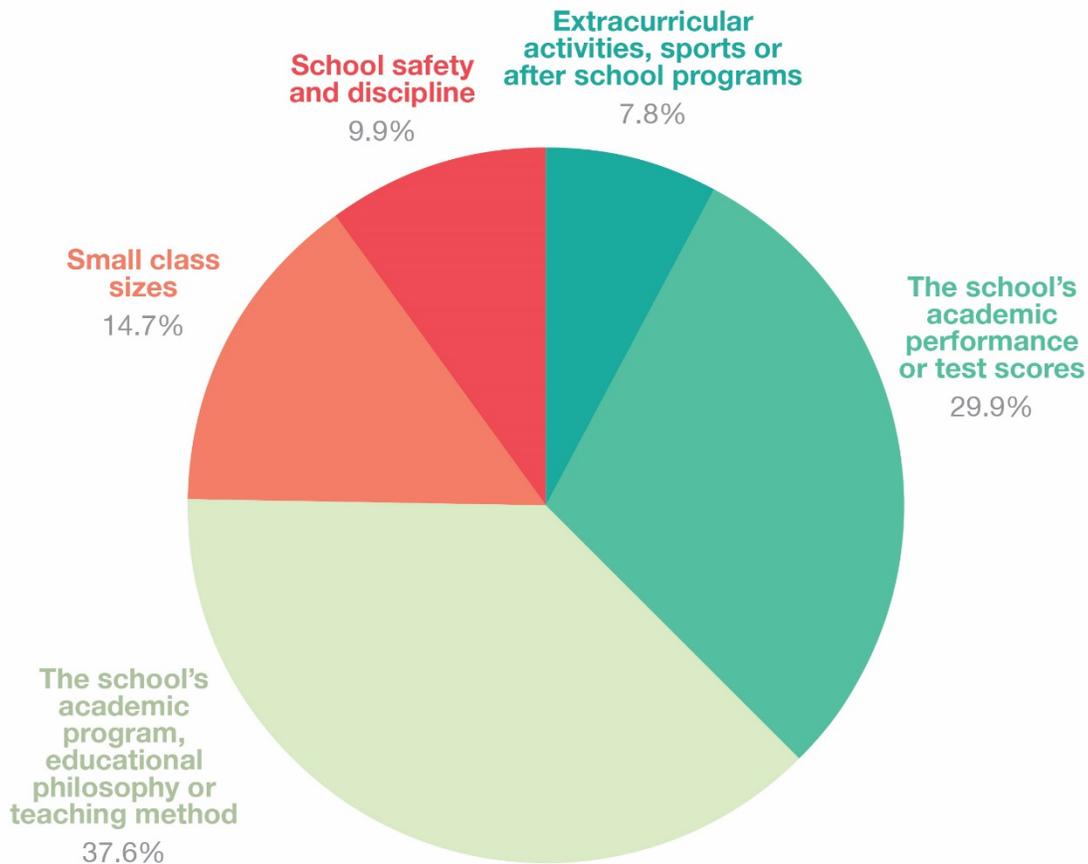
**Graphic 4: Of the Following Six Factors, Which One was the Most Important in Helping You Make the Best Possible Decision About Selecting a School?**



The survey also asked parents what was the most important factor when they considered making the choice to enroll in a school other than the one assigned to them based on where they live. A school’s “academic program, educational philosophy or teaching method” (38 percent) was the factor most commonly referred to by survey respondents. Different programs that might attract parents include things like the Montessori teaching methodology, a STEM-focused school or a strong emphasis on fine arts or performing arts. The next most popular answer was “academic performance or test scores” (30 percent), suggesting that a lot of parents are choosing a different school in the hopes of boosting their child’s academic performance. Other factors that were significant but less prominent include smaller class sizes (15 percent) and safety and disciplinary concerns (10 percent).\*

\* These trends differ a little from previous measures of Detroit parent opinion. The 2012 Michigan Future Inc. survey found that more experienced school shoppers placed higher value on measurable academic performance, while potential school shoppers were more

**Graphic 5: Of the Five Following Factors, Which One Strongly Influenced Your Decision to Choose a School?**



## Discussion and Conclusion

For more than two decades Michigan has offered parents a limited opportunity to enroll their children in public schools other than the ones assigned to them based on where they live. While this opportunity is limited by the discretion of conventional districts and the capacity of charter schools, overall use of choice has steadily grown.

This is the first known systematic survey of Michigan parents statewide who exercise public school choice. It provides a valuable piece of the picture to better understand parents' perceptions and opinions of their school choice experience. Parental decisions about education reflect the unique

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motivated to find better "safety and discipline." The 2014 CRPE survey similarly found that parents with more formal education were much more likely to prioritize academic quality in choosing schools over safety and location. Thomas Stewart and Patrick J. Wolf, "Understanding School Shoppers in Detroit" (Michigan Future Inc., Feb. 2012), <https://perma.cc/GC4U-39ZD>; Ashley Jochim et al., "How Parents Experience Public School Choice" (Center on Reinventing Public Education, Dec. 2014), <https://perma.cc/F4PJ-L6GE>.

needs and character of their own children. Still, several key general lessons emerge from the survey's findings.

- 1) **Parents tend to be satisfied with their choices.** Large shares of Michigan's school choice users highly rate the options they have been able to select. And low-income and African-American parents in particular report greater expectations for their children due to their experience with choice.
- 2) **Parents tend to see academics as the most important factor in choosing a school, but standardized test scores aren't necessarily driving decisions.** Two-thirds of parents identified academic factors as the most important feature for choosing a school. Objective measures of academic performance carry great weight with some parents, but demand for different educational programs or philosophies is at least as strong a driver. African-American parents are more likely to highly value test score data in their decisions, but there appears to be no difference based on family income.
- 3) **Parents pay attention to other parents' experiences.** While school choice users appear to rely on a variety of sources to inform their decisions, nothing carries greater weight than the insights of other parents with whom they interact. It isn't clear to what extent this finding is driven by the power of informal social networks, or to what extent parents value access to more meaningful information about school quality and characteristics. This finding provides an opening for some choice schools to make information about education options more useful and readily available and to make the application process and paperwork less burdensome.

As Michigan policymakers address growing demand for educational alternatives, the voices of parents who benefit from these policies should be given prominent consideration.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Julie Mack, “23% of Michigan Public School Students Opt for School Choice,” *MLive.com*, Aug. 29, 2016, <https://perma.cc/ZK38-LD8Z>.

<sup>2</sup> Joshua Cowen, Benjamin Creed and Venessa Keesler, “Dynamic Participation in Inter-District Open Enrollment: Evidence from Michigan 2005-2013” (The Education Policy Center at Michigan State University, July 2015), 15, <https://perma.cc/4SBG-LGZY>.

<sup>3</sup> MCL § 380.501; MCL § 388.1705.

<sup>4</sup> “Michigan Charter Schools - Questions and Answers” (Michigan Department of Education, Jan. 2016), <http://perma.cc/B3TA-DDMA>.

<sup>5</sup> “Schools of Choice” (Michigan Department of Education, Dec. 2013), <https://perma.cc/6BM7-FEG5>.

<sup>6</sup> MCL § 388.1705.

<sup>7</sup> MCL § 388.1705c.

<sup>8</sup> For an example, see: “The Kent ISD Collaborative Schools of Choice Plan” (Kent Intermediate Superintendents’ Association, 2017), <https://perma.cc/JH8Z-KN69>.

<sup>9</sup> Joshua Cowen, Benjamin Creed and Venessa Keesler, “Dynamic Participation in Inter-District Open Enrollment: Evidence from Michigan 2005-2013” (The Education Policy Center at Michigan State University, July 2015), <https://perma.cc/4SBG-LGZY>.

<sup>10</sup> Author’s calculations based on data from the Michigan Department of Education’s “2016-17 Pupil Headcount Data (MSDS) (Fall and Spring Data)” file, available here: <https://goo.gl/CwJlXd>.

<sup>11</sup> Joshua Cowen, Benjamin Creed and Venessa Keesler, “Dynamic Participation in Inter-District Open Enrollment: Evidence from Michigan 2005-2013” (The Education Policy Center at Michigan State University, July 2015), 16, <https://perma.cc/4SBG-LGZY>.

<sup>12</sup> Joshua M. Cowen, “A Look at Michigan’s Schools of Choice: What Do We Know, And What Do We Need to Learn” (Michigan State University, April 6, 2016), <https://perma.cc/T6W8-K6FP>.

<sup>13</sup> Joshua Cowen, Benjamin Creed and Venessa Keesler, “Dynamic Participation in Inter-District Open Enrollment: Evidence from Michigan 2005-2013” (The Education Policy Center at Michigan State University, July 2015), 21, <https://perma.cc/4SBG-LGZY>.

<sup>14</sup> “Charter School Performance in Michigan” (Stanford University: Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Jan. 11, 2013), <https://perma.cc/FDP2-RJW8>; “Urban Charter School Study Report on 41 Regions” (Stanford University: Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2015), <https://perma.cc/FB2R-MFG6>.

<sup>15</sup> Joshua M. Cowen, “A Look at Michigan’s Schools of Choice: What Do We Know, And What Do We Need to Learn” (Michigan State University, April 6, 2016), <https://perma.cc/T6W8-K6FP>.

## **Endnotes (cont.)**

<sup>16</sup> Audrey Spalding, “The Public School Market in Michigan: An Analysis of Schools of Choice” (Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 2013), 12, <https://perma.cc/3BSY-ZHDA>.

<sup>17</sup> “Michigan Charter Schools - Questions and Answers” (Michigan Department of Education, Jan. 2016), <http://perma.cc/B3TA-DDMA>.

<sup>18</sup> Ashley Jochim et al., “How Parents Experience Public School Choice” (Center on Reinventing Public Education, Dec. 2014), 18, 22, <https://perma.cc/F4PJ-L6GE>.

<sup>19</sup> Albert Cheng and Paul E. Peterson, “How Satisfied Are Parents with Their Children’s Schools,” *Education Next* XVII, Spring (2017), <https://perma.cc/GP2S-BKJ2>.

<sup>20</sup> “Full School Choice Tracking Survey 2016” (Mackinac Center for Public Policy, Aug. 8, 2016), 20, <https://perma.cc/SQE2-MZK8>.

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