

A MACKINAC CENTER REPORT



Choices & Voices

A Survey of Michigan
Charter School Parents

“My main reason that I love and [that school choice] is important for me is because there have been a lot of school closings in Flint and so for this one to open up and come in the area, I don't have to worry about overcrowding. [It's] smaller and more personal. My children get more one-on-one time there.”

Tiffany Brown

Parent of two kids attending
Greater Heights Academy

Flint, MI



Introduction

A quarter century ago, Michigan became one of the first states to adopt a law allowing for the creation of charter schools, officially designated “public school academies.” These state-funded, tuition-free schools of choice are authorized by public agencies, most commonly universities and community colleges, and governed by independent boards. These schools operate outside the conventional district system, but must administer the same state tests and meet the same accountability standards as all other public schools.

Today, one in 10 Michigan public school students attends a charter school. These schools are

more likely to be located in low-income, urban communities, where families demonstrate a more urgent need for educational alternatives. As a result, the state’s charter population is 70 percent low-income and 50 percent African-American, much higher rates than the state’s schools at large.

The best available research and data consistently show that Michigan charter schools, on average, provide students with learning gains, and do it with less funding from taxpayers.¹ Nonetheless, in a state experiencing a steady decline in student enrollments, charter schools and other forms of school choice have appeared in the crosshairs of defenders of the conventional district system.

Yet the voices of parents exercising educational choice are seldom heard in public debates. In 2017, the Mackinac Center conducted and reported results from a statewide survey of parents exercising choice through both charter schools and Schools of Choice, a limited program that enables parents to enroll their children in schools located outside their resident district.² This current report focuses just on the opinions of parents of charter school students, but provides greater depth to better understand their experience with school choice. All told, this survey includes the complete responses from 1,440 parents of children attending charter schools.³

The goal is that the opinions collected and reported in this survey will help inform state lawmakers, education officials, charter authorizers and others charged with making decisions that affect educational opportunity and access in Michigan.



1 “Charter School Performance in Michigan” (Stanford University: Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2013), <https://perma.cc/6YZF-VPPH>; “Doing More With Less: The Charter School Advantage in Michigan” (Mackinac Center for Public Policy, Jan. 31, 2018), <https://perma.cc/MD9M-DG2Q>.

2 Ben DeGrow, “A Survey of Michigan Parents Who Use School Choice” (Mackinac Center for Public Policy, Sept. 14, 2017), <https://perma.cc/VD4B-NYW3>.

3 For additional information about the survey respondents, please see “Appendix: Survey Methodology and Respondent Demographics.”



85%

of parents surveyed would grade the overall quality of their children's school an A or a B

Survey Results

Are Parents Satisfied?

Three specific questions aimed at measuring parent satisfaction with their chosen charter school were taken from the previous 2017 telephone survey to provide a baseline comparison. The strongly positive reactions from this current survey largely mirrored those previous results, if not demonstrating even greater favorability overall.

First, respondents were asked to assign a letter grade to denote the overall quality of their school. More than half of parents said their school was worthy of an A, with nearly 85 percent selecting either an A or B grade. Less than 5 percent gave their school a D or F. Compared with the 2017 survey, a slightly

higher share of respondents opted for the highest grade, while fewer selected C grades and lower.

Parents rated their expectations of their child's attainment in the new educational setting by responding to the following question: "Overall, how has enrolling your child in a charter school affected how far you expect your child to go in his or her education?" Sixty percent said their new school gave them higher expectations, compared to only 4 percent who said the charter experience resulted in lower expectations. Both of these figures are slightly lower than the 2017 sample, with more respondents of this current survey saying their expectations have not changed either way. Interestingly, parents from the lowest income bracket were most likely to express greater expectations, at 71 percent.



60%

of parents agreed that their charter school has positively impacted how far they expect their child to go in his or her education

91%

of parents surveyed would recommend charter schools to other parents

Respondents were also asked how likely they would be to recommend charter schools to other parents based on their own experience. More than 90 percent offered a favorable response, including 64 percent who said they would be “very likely” to recommend a charter school to other parents. This very high rate of favorable responses was consistent across all subgroups. Charter school parents had a stronger positive reaction to this question than the broader sample of parents interviewed in the 2017 survey.

When asked to name one thing that they most like about their child’s charter school, 31 percent of parents offered an answer to the open-ended question that included caring teachers, principals and other staff members. Parents of students in online charter schools, however, most often expressed appreciation of the school’s

flexibility to meet their child’s particular learning needs. The next most commonly provided responses were the school’s curriculum and the theme of smaller classes and a welcoming school environment.





The main reasons parents opted to enroll in a public charter school rather than remain in their assigned district school:

35%
Academic Quality

21%
Safety concerns

25%
Meet unique learning needs

16%
More personal learning environment

Why Parents Choose

The online format of the survey provided the opportunity to go into greater depth about the motivation for finding a new school, the process of exercising choice, and what works well and what needs to be improved.

An open-ended question on the survey asked parents to identify the main reason they opted to enroll in a public charter school rather than remain in their assigned district school.⁴ These are the four broad categories of the most common responses:

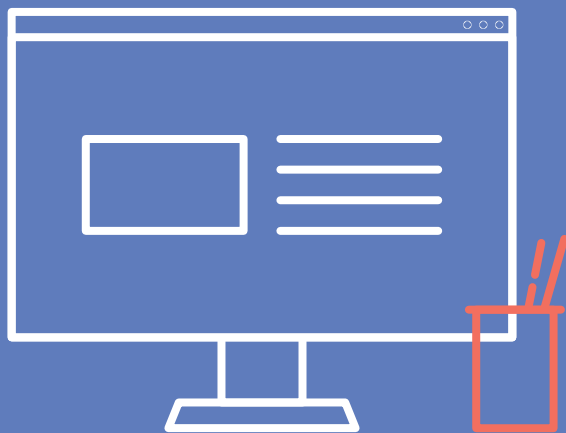
1) 35 percent said they were looking for more advanced courses, challenging curricula or

opportunities to excel, or a general academic focus that they didn't find at their assigned school. This was especially true of families in Detroit and throughout Wayne County.

2) 25 percent said their child was not getting enough help, their special learning needs were not being met, or that they needed flexibility to learn at their own pace. This answer was especially common in the mid-Michigan region that encompasses Lansing, Jackson and Battle Creek.

3) 21 percent pointed to incidences of bullying or racism, or to lack of safety and discipline, as a leading reason to leave their assigned school. Many of these respondents ultimately opted to enroll in an online charter school.

⁴ In some cases, two different categories of answer were accepted from a single respondent, such that the total number of answers exceeds 100 percent of the sample.



The most useful source of information when deciding where to enroll their child:

School Website

4) **16 percent specifically cited a desire for smaller class sizes or smaller school environments.** Parents from counties surrounding the metro Detroit area — including Lapeer, Livingston, Monroe, St. Clair and Washtenaw — were twice as likely to cite this type of motivation.

Navigating Options

Michigan school districts typically do not offer parents manuals that tell them where to learn about other publicly available education options. Still, 46 percent of charter school parents strongly agreed, and only 4 percent disagreed, with the statement: “I was able to find the information I needed to choose the best school for my child.”

Other motivating factors included finding a more conveniently located school, personal issues related to the child, a desire for character or values-based education and a desire for greater diversity in the student population.

Among respondents to the 2017 survey, conversations with other parents were most frequently identified as the most important source that helped them make the best informed choice. The current results from charter school parents took a somewhat different turn.

This year’s survey invited parents to rate seven different potential sources of information on a five-point scale, based on their usefulness

The most important factors to parents when choosing a school:

Quality of academics

School safety

Educational philosophy

Principal and teaching staff

Access to educational technology

Smaller class sizes

School discipline

Special learning needs

in selecting a charter school. Charter school websites rated most highly, followed by school visits or open houses. These results are slightly skewed by the larger numbers of online school parents, as their brick-and-mortar counterparts reversed the top two picks. Billboards and other advertising were universally discounted as the least useful.

Parents were also asked to weigh the value of 20 different factors in determining what they looked for in a new school, again using a five-point scale. The online format allowed the opportunity to offer a richer menu of possible factors than the five choices available in the 2017 phone survey. The results reveal both some consistent themes of what matters to families, as well as some diverse views.

Based on all of the responses, the 20 factors can be broken into three groups based on how

important they were to parents. First, the top eight priorities include the quality of academics, school safety — which was especially important to African-American parents — educational philosophy, principal and teaching staff, as well as access to educational technology, smaller class sizes and school discipline. Also in this top group was a school's ability to meet a child's special learning needs, most highly rated by parents in the lowest income brackets and by those with the least educational attainment.

In the middle group based on importance are eight priorities such as fine arts programs, parent volunteer opportunities and standardized test scores. The latter two become less important for parents with more income and education. The convenience of school location, recommendations from other parents and knowing other students at the school all attracted moderate interest. On the

Average ratings of factors used in choosing a school, reported by subgroups of parents

5-point scale: 1 = “Not at all important” to 5 = “Extremely important”

RACE / ETHNICITY		GRADE OF CHILD		REGION	
Asian / Pacific Islander	4.27	K-5	4.00	Wayne County / Detroit	4.10
Black / African-American	4.23	6-8	3.86	Oakland County	3.91
Hispanic	4.10	9-12	3.69	Macomb County	3.91
White / Caucasian	3.64			Thumb / Tri-Cities	3.65
				Northern Lower Michigan	3.62
				West Michigan	3.60
				Mid Michigan	3.54
HOUSEHOLD INCOME		CHARTER TYPE			
\$0 - \$24,999	4.02	Building	4.04		
\$25,000 - \$49,999	3.91	Online	3.50		
\$50,000 - \$74,999	3.78				
\$75,000 - \$99,999	3.75				
\$100K+	3.65				

other hand, somewhat different answers related to a school’s cultural focus or diversity of the student body also appeared in this group.

The least important factors as identified by charter school parents were four factors such as afterschool programs and available school-provided or public transportation. These are of especially low importance to wealthier families and those with older students. Sports programs also received some of the lowest ratings, even from parents of high school-aged students.

Another interesting trend emerges from a disaggregation of these answers. Certain groups of respondents — parents with lower income and less education, parents from Detroit and Wayne County, parents of students in elementary grades and parents representing racial minorities — tended to rate all the factors as consistently higher, or more important, than other groups, even

if they generally ranked factors in the same order of priority. The use of consistently higher ratings by certain groups of parents may indicate that they are more likely to find their assigned school lacking in many of these features. In turn, this may suggest a broader and deeper need to improve their child’s school environment.

The biggest gap came between the African-American and Asian-American parents on one hand, who were much more likely to highly rank more factors compared to white parents. However, within these groups, there was still considerable variation. Lower-income and African-American students are disproportionately represented among the state’s charter school population. The greater intensity in their parents’ answers may offer some clues as to why they are clearly drawn to the alternatives that charters provide.



The biggest hurdle for parents when choosing a charter school:

Finding Information About School Quality

15.2%

OTHER COMMON RESPONSES:

14.3%

Finding schools with openings

7.9%

Understanding how to enroll your child in a charter school

6.2%

Scheduling school visits or appointments

Obstacles and Second Choices

Out of more than 1,500 responses, 85 percent said their child was enrolled in their first choice for a school. Among the remaining 15 percent, one-third indicated that their first-choice school was at capacity and not accepting new enrollments.⁵ Sixteen percent of parents who said their child was not in a first-choice school identified transportation challenges as the reason they had to resort to a less preferred option.

The survey also presented six different potential challenges that might make the charter selection

process difficult for families. About 70 percent of respondents claimed to have no problems with any of these issues. The remainder cited one or more as obstacles. The most common problem selected was “finding information about school quality,” followed by “finding schools with openings.” Parents who said they settled for a second choice were more than twice as likely to cite these two problems, as well as “scheduling school visits or appointments,” compared to parents who secured their first choice. The least identified obstacle among all parents was “meeting application deadlines.”

⁵ Charter schools are required by law to use a random lottery to determine which children will be enrolled when the school is at capacity. Presumably, the children of these respondents were not selected through a school lottery. MCL § 380.504(3).

Responses from question: “Did any of the following make it difficult for you when choosing a charter school for your child?”

Obstacles	Child enrolled in 1st Choice School (%)	Child NOT in 1st Choice School (%)
Finding information about school quality	13.1	29.0
Finding schools with openings	12.3	26.0
Understanding how to enroll your child in a charter school	7.3	12.4
Scheduling school visits or appointments	4.8	13.9
Difficult or confusing paperwork	6.0	7.8
Meeting application deadlines	4.8	8.6

85%

of parents surveyed are satisfied with the choices their child has for school transportation

Transportation

The ability to safely and conveniently transport a child to school on a daily basis can be a limiting factor for parents enrolling their children in the school of their choice. Perhaps unexpectedly, the surveyed parents least likely to express satisfaction in their transportation options hail from the suburbs around Detroit. In all, 85 percent of brick-and-mortar charter parents said they are satisfied — including 40 percent “very satisfied” — with their choices of getting their child to and from school. Among parents in the counties of Macomb and Oakland, 70 percent said the same. On the other hand, the satisfaction rate in western Michigan — a 14-county region that includes Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, Muskegon and Benton Harbor — topped 95 percent.

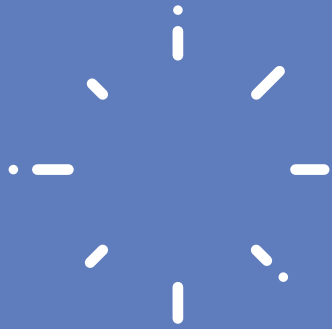
Parental satisfaction with school transportation may be determined in part by the availability

of a school bus. About half of Michigan charter schools, despite receiving less funding than conventional districts on average, offer student transportation services. But parents may not necessarily avail themselves of the option, as only 18 percent indicated their child rides a bus. The share of low-income and African-American students using this option is slightly higher.

More than three-fourths of respondents whose children attend school at a brick-and-mortar charter campus said that the student gets there by way of a family vehicle or a carpool. Only a few said their children walk to school or take public transportation.

Finally, parents report a wide variety of school commute lengths. The typical time it takes to get from home to school is about 15 minutes. Even so, about 15 percent say it takes 30 minutes or longer and about 2 percent report an hour or longer commute.

If you could improve ONE thing about the charter school, what would it be?



18%
Nothing



11%
Sports / Activities
/ Extracurriculars



10%
Communication

Concerns and Future Plans

When asked if they could change one thing about their child's charter school, the most common answer parents gave was "nothing," at 18 percent. The only other identified issues shared by at least 10 percent of the respondents were the lack of athletic or other extracurricular activities, and timely communication from the school.

In all, 84 percent of respondents declared that their child will likely continue in the same charter school for the next school year. Take away those students who have graduated or completed the highest available grade at a school, as well as those who have to leave due to family circumstances, and just a little over 10 percent say they will probably leave their current school because they are dissatisfied.

Discussion & Conclusion

Twenty-five years of experience with parental choice in public education provides an opportunity for reflection. Data on student outcomes have ascribed generally positive impacts from charter schools, on average, but listening to the families who actively participating in choice can reveal even more about the importance of access and how to make charter schools serve parents better. As public officials and policymakers continue to consider the role of charter schools in Michigan's taxpayer-funded public education system, they should carefully consider the voice of parents who have actively stepped out to access these options.

Other observations may emerge from a close look at the extensive data from this survey, but the following seven points are worthy of special attention.

1) Parents are clearly satisfied with the charter schools they've chosen. Well over 80 percent assign their schools an A or B, 90 percent are likely to recommend school choice to their peers and 60 percent have higher expectations for their child's educational attainment as a result. The personal and professional qualities both of teachers and other staff represents the greatest source of satisfaction, but parents like their new schools for many other reasons too. Small numbers of parents register dissatisfaction, providing a possible avenue to new educational options that might provide a better fit.

2) The search that leads to charter schools is driven by real needs. A clear majority of parents have opted for a different educational setting because their child was falling behind or not being challenged enough academically, or facing bullying or some other threat to their personal safety. Academics and safety also universally emerge as highly valued factors in a parent's search for a new school.

3) Most parents seem able to find the information they need to make informed decisions. Very few parents said they were unhappy with the information available to them to select their new charter school. In-person visits and school websites were cited as the most important sources of information.

4) Still, more information about school quality could help some families. Most parents

recalled encountering no serious obstacles to making their choice. Nonetheless, the most commonly cited barrier to parents accessing the first choice for their child was insufficient information about the quality of schools. Parents whose child did not get into the charter school of their choice were much more likely to say inadequate information made the process of choosing a school more difficult.

5) The least advantaged parents feel most strongly about the importance of certain characteristics of the school they want for their children. A clear trend emerged in the responses. Parents from certain minority groups, lower income brackets and less educated backgrounds consistently gave higher ratings to more factors that guided their decision to enroll in a new school,

suggesting that they considered a wide variety of factors before making their choice. This may also suggest that these parents are more likely to feel that the district-run schools available to them are lacking in these characteristics.

6) It is difficult to identify the overall extent of student transportation concerns. A large majority of parents said they were satisfied with options for transporting their child to and from school. But even those that were unsatisfied were able to find a way to get them there.

7) The choices available now may not be enough. While overall satisfaction is high, about 10 percent of the charter parents interviewed indicated that they're likely to leave their current charter school after the school year. That suggests a small but

significant subset of families who either see public school choice as a temporary solution or they are not finding a satisfactory school situation that they can make work long-term. Offering these parents more options, through the existing Schools of Choice program, the opening of new charter schools or through something like tuition scholarships or education savings accounts that could be used to pay for private school tuition, may hold some appeal for this group of parents.

Opportunity exists for additional surveys and focus groups to get to clearer answers and identify other possible key trends. Yet for now, these insights should at least help shape the public discourse on the role of charter schools and other education options. Let's not shortchange the critical voices of Michigan parents.

Appendix:

Survey Methodology and Respondent Demographics

In partnership with Marketing Resource Group, the Mackinac Center for Public Policy created a survey for parents of Michigan charter school students. The online survey was open to responses from May 17 to June 22, 2018. The opportunity to participate was advertised to parents through charter authorizers, management organizations and other groups. Because not every parent of a charter school student could be contacted and provided an opportunity to participate, the results are considered a nonprobability survey.

The self-selected sample of participating parents places clear limitations on the confidence of making conclusive observations. Even so, the insights provided by hundreds of charter school parents on a range of seldom-explored issues about the experience with educational choice in Michigan ought to elevate and expand the public discussion of this topic.

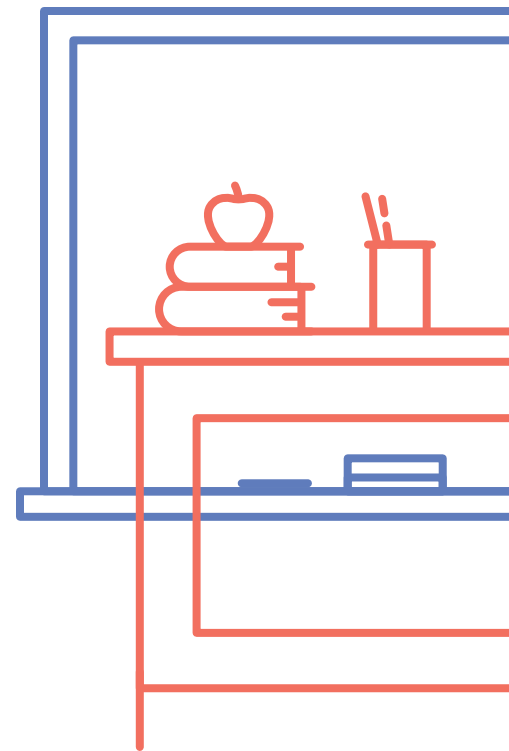
A total of 1,440 parents completed the entire online survey, though many individual questions received more responses. Parents of online charter school students are overrepresented, providing 37 percent of responses though they make up less than 10 percent of the state's charter school population. Parents of African-American students, who comprise half of Michigan's charter enrollment, only count for 24 percent of survey respondents. On the other hand, parents of white students covered 60 percent of the survey, a far greater rate than the 32 percent in the general charter student population.

The sample appears to be somewhat more representative from a geographic and economic standpoint. Forty-four percent of all Michigan charter students attend school in Wayne County, while 36 percent of all survey respondents reported being from the same region. The median yearly household income of survey

takers was a little less than \$50,000. That figure is close to the state's overall median earnings, but probably not too much greater than that of charter school families, most of whose children qualify for free or reduced-price lunches through a federal program based on their annual household income.⁶

Respondents identified politically as Democrats more than Republicans — 36 percent to 22 percent, respectively. Self-described independents were the most prevalent political identity, coming in at 39 percent. Also of note, females were eight times more likely than males to answer the survey questions.

⁶ According to the 2017-18 guidelines for free and reduced-price lunch income eligibility, a family of three must make less than \$37,777; a family of four less than \$45,510; and a family of five less than \$53,243. For more information, see <https://perma.cc/274L-ATA2>.





“Our family chose to utilize school choice because our youngest son is epileptic and our oldest son is dyslexic. When we first started (virtual learning) our oldest son was on a second-grade level in the fifth grade. He is now on grade level, being successful and both of their needs are being met.”

Aley Minton

Parent at Michigan
Connections Academy

Port Huron, MI



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