



The school choice journey: Parents experiencing more than improved test scores

By Thomas Stewart and Patrick J. Wolf

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Key Points

- Studies indicate that low-income parents participating in the District of Columbia’s private-school choice program prioritize—at least initially—the safety of schools over schools’ academic quality as they transition from public schools. Furthermore, when evaluating their child’s academic progress, parents do not view standardized test scores as a key metric of success.
- Most interestingly, these urban parents report that they want to be respected as advocates of their child’s education and will fight hard to keep their child’s private-school choice program if that program’s future is threatened.
- These lessons should be considered when designing and implementing publicly funded, means-tested programs in an effort to break the cycle of poverty among low-income families and disadvantaged communities.

Private-school choice is many things, depending on families’ income and geographic location. It is an education policy reform, a flashpoint of political controversy, and an example of government outsourcing of public-service provision. It is also a journey for low-income parents who move from being clients of social services to consumers of goods and advocates for their own political interests.

Most policy analysts and policymakers evaluate private-school choice programs based on the sole criterion of student test-score gains. They assume that test-score increases are what parents

and society want most from schools and that student scores are the outcome that school choice will most affect. Our research suggests that these assumptions are largely false.

From 2004 until 2009, we carefully documented the school choice journey of 100 families participating in the District of Columbia (DC) Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP). The OSP is the nation's only federally funded private-school choice program. It provides K–12 tuition vouchers worth up to \$7,500 to low-income students in DC to attend any participating private school of their family's choosing.

With financial support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, we conducted an annual series of focus-group sessions and personal interviews with these low-income urban families. Most of the families were selecting schools, specifically private schools, for the first time. Their stories of excitement, challenge, occasional frustration, and ultimate triumph are told in our new book, *The School Choice Journey: School Vouchers and the Empowerment of Urban Families*.¹

The Journey reveals four key lessons:

- Parents participating in OSP tend to follow Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs when selecting schools. They first ensure that their child is safe at school before focusing on academic quality.
- Unlike policymakers, parents do not view test scores as the key metric of success in education (or even as one of the main indicators of success). They use less-formal measures of student growth and development to assess progress and satisfaction.
- Urban parents benefit from informational and programmatic supports when exercising school choice for the first time, but they also need to be respected as the shapers of their child's education.
- Low-income parents view private-school choice programs as sufficiently valuable to them that they will fight hard to keep their child's program if politicians try to take it away from them.

Government programs can be delivered to recipients in ways that range from highly paternalistic to completely hands-off. We argue in *The Journey* that neither of these extremes is constructive for interventions geared toward income-disadvantaged urban families. When government programs are implemented in a highly paternalistic way, clients play no role in shaping the nature of the service and often feel demeaned, disenfranchised, and dependent.

When government initiatives are completely hands-off, though, income-disadvantaged participants can feel overwhelmed by their new responsibilities and fail to make the program work to their advantage. The best way for the government to implement social interventions, we argue, is to aim for a sweet spot that allows program participants sufficient control over the service so that they feel they own it, while also providing key programmatic supports needed to make the program a success.

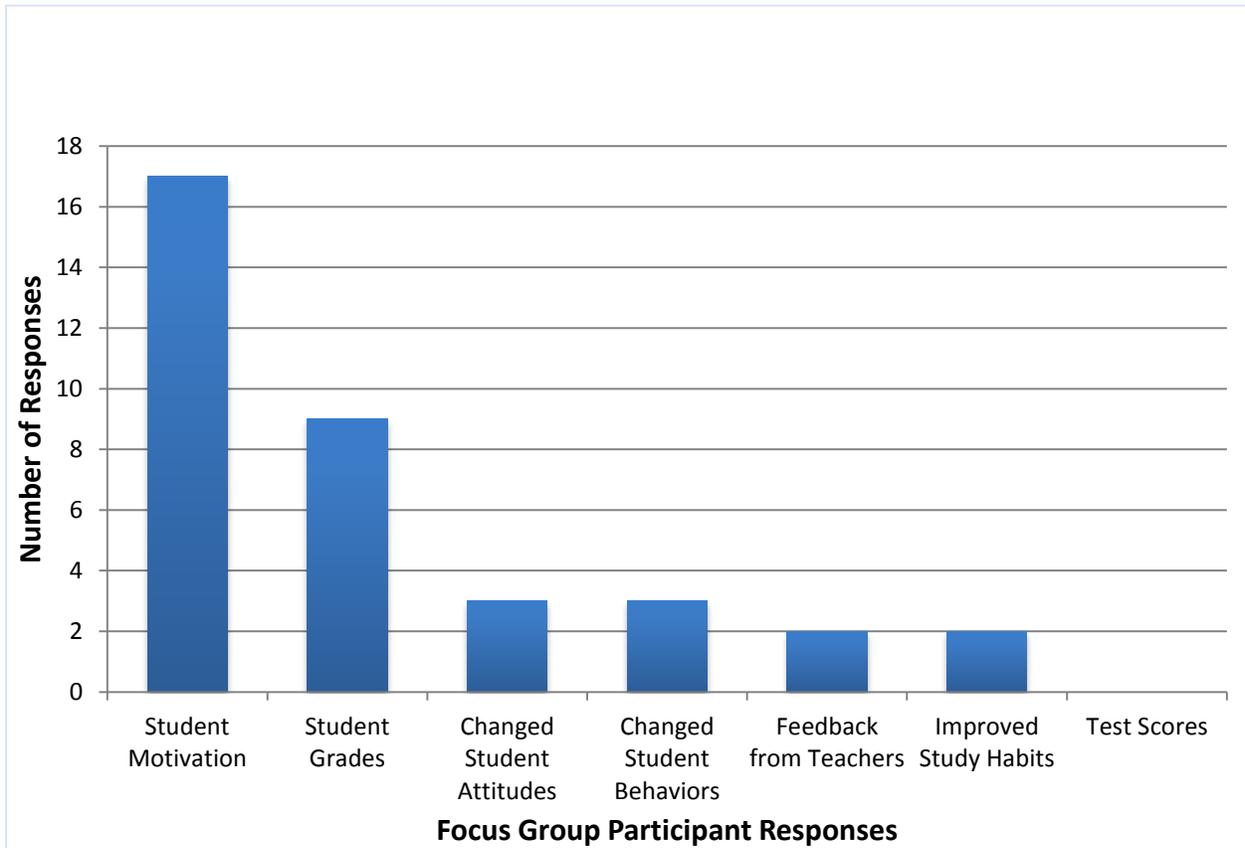
Many parents whose child received the Opportunity Scholarships to attend a private school of their choice initially had a client mentality: they were used to receiving government services such as Medicaid and disability benefits, which tend to be delivered by professional bureaucrats with an air of spirit-crushing paternalism.² The new school choice program challenged these parents to transcend their client perspective and become informed consumers and proactive choosers of their child's private school. A school choice was not going to be handed to them. They had to make their own choice and remain active participants in the process.

Maslow's Hierarchy, Standardized Test Scores, and Social Networks

When deciding where to send their child to school, urban parents appear to adhere to Maslow's famous hierarchy of human needs, which holds that humans need to satisfy basic physical needs before fulfilling social, emotional, and career needs on the path that Maslow called "self-actualization."³ Safety is parents' first priority. Once they are confident that their child is in a safe school, parents shift their attention to the academic rigor and curricular offerings of the school. This was made evident in focus groups, where parents were very explicit that safety came first for their child and only then did they seek to satisfy their child's higher-order needs. We used the focus groups to thoroughly explore how low-income families assess their child's development. One piece of information that parents viewed as of little use was student scores on

standardized tests. When we asked a large focus group of more than 30 parents how they assess their child’s progress in school, not one of them selected test scores as the answer (see figure 1).

Figure 1. How Do You Measure or Assess Your Child’s Academic Improvement?



Source: The authors

Instead, parents look for more subtle signs that their child is succeeding in school, such as homework completion and a positive attitude toward school. Education policy analysts and politicians are often obsessed with using test scores to evaluate schools, teachers, and students, but parents see them as decidedly less important and informative than other measures that they influence and can observe on a daily basis.

Parents in the OSP were more successful in selecting an appropriate private school for their child if they had access to strong family and social networks. Both two-parent and single-parent families with substantial support from their extended family tended to navigate the journey more

effectively, as they had more time and better sources of information to become informed school choice consumers. Single-parent families lacking support from their extended family struggled to find a good school choice placement for their child.

Specifically, single parents without a strong social network lacked the resources and supports necessary to thoughtfully pursue their school options. They tended to visit fewer private schools than their better-resourced peers before selecting a school for their child. All parents requested more helpful informational supports, such as independent school guides, but those requests were most consistent and most strongly made among single parents in the program.

Parental Empowerment

Our most surprising and arguably most important finding in *The Journey* is that the OSP empowered parents to become more politically active citizens. This is an important example of parents moving from a client to an active disposition. The phrase “power to the people” assumes that some major social event has produced an impact that yields more authority to a group that previously possessed limited power. Our study suggests that providing parents the wherewithal to pursue schools that they feel are the best fit for their child produces a result that transcends “power to the people.” Give parents more authority over their most important responsibility—the education of their child—and they become more active and empowered citizens.

As classically trained political scientists, this finding was the most surprising to us. Political scientists rarely agree completely on a position, but one clear point of consensus is that African Americans and Latinos who have low levels of income and education tend to be politically inactive.⁴ Such disadvantaged citizens, many of whom live in inner cities, tend to have little influence over the governmental rules and policies that affect them. Movements to shape public policy in ways that serve the interests of America’s poor fail, according to the research literature, because disadvantaged Americans are so difficult to activate.⁵

We thought the families in the OSP would fit the prevailing pattern of disadvantaged, politically inactive Americans. After all, they possessed many of the characteristics associated with a lack of political involvement—low incomes, low levels of education, and the daily challenges of

raising a family in the inner city. Initially, only a few parents in our study indicated that they voted on a regular basis or had contact with elected officials through activities such as attending public meetings or writing letters to office holders.

Three years into their school choice journey, in 2007, we asked these parents what they might be willing to do to publically support the OSP if politicians tried to end it. Some parents said they would be willing to write letters to members of Congress or even testify in support of the program if necessary, but hardly any of them thought it would be necessary. The federal government was providing tuition vouchers to low-income families in DC, and the families felt they were benefiting from the program. Why would anyone want to take that away from them?

Well, to make a long story short (this is a summary of a book, after all), some politicians did try to end the OSP in 2009.⁶ Political opposition to school vouchers as an education reform had grown in DC to the point where the OSP was closed to new applicants, including the siblings of current voucher students, and starved for funds. As more and more OSP students graduated from high school, which they did at much higher rates than students who applied for the program but did not win the scholarship lottery, program enrollment would eventually drop to zero and the federal government's highly publicized experiment with private-school choice for low-income DC families would end.⁷ At least, that is what the program's opponents believed would happen.

The parents with children in the OSP refused to accept this client script. These newly empowered parents who had a publicly sponsored benefit to lose turned out more than 1,000 strong at a series of rallies and protests to save the program.⁸ Many parents and high-school students in the OSP testified before Congress and provided impassioned pleas to the media to save the program by opening it back up to new students.⁹

Finally, in April 2011, these surprisingly empowered parents won their battle when a proposal championed by Senator Joe Lieberman (I-CT) and House of Representatives Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) to reauthorize and expand the OSP was included in the budget continuing resolution at the 11th hour.¹⁰ (Former Senator Lieberman wrote the foreword to our book.) Not only was the program rescued from extinction, but it was also saved largely by a group of low-

income, overwhelmingly minority, urban parents—precisely the kinds of Americans who social scientists predict are unlikely to be politically active. In their school choice journey, these passengers took over the ship and steered it safely into harbor.

Conclusion

Most of the existing literature on parental school choice misses the crucial story about why parents seek it and what it can do for them from a comprehensive perspective.¹¹ Parents do not pursue student test-score gains so much as they seek safety and character development for their child. For themselves, parents view school choice as a pathway to dignity, respect, and empowerment.

Ours is the first book that we know of that examines whether the opportunity to exercise school choice truly empowers parents. The empowerment of urban parents is important because adults who are able to influence their environment can turn their lives around, even if they have relatively low levels of income and education. The fact that the journey unexpectedly ended in the land of political empowerment clearly made the trip well worth it for most of the participating families.

The Journey also challenges us as researchers, policymakers, philanthropists, and others who are deeply concerned about school choice to consider or reconsider some important, burning questions: Have we become too focused on test scores? Do we really know what the most important educational values are from the perspective of urban families? What can we take from this subset of parents to apply to the parent population at large? How does program design and implementation influence outcomes? This is a journey we look forward to exploring with others who share our interest in education reform and breaking the cycle of poverty in disadvantaged families and communities.

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Notes

1. For this and subsequent references to *The Journey*, see Thomas Stewart and Patrick J. Wolf, *The School Choice Journey: School Vouchers and the Empowerment of Families* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
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3. Abraham Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review* 50 (1943): 370–96.
4. E. E. Schaatsneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1967).
5. Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, *Power and Poverty: Theory and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).
6. Peter Roff, “Obama Wrong on DC School Vouchers and Hypocritical, just Like Congress,” Thomas Jefferson Street, April 22, 2009, www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/peter-roff/2009/04/22/obama-wrong-on-dc-school-vouchers-and-hypocritical-just-like-congress.
7. Patrick J. Wolf et al., “School Vouchers and Student Outcomes: Experimental Evidence from Washington, DC,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 32, no. 2 (April 2013): 246–70, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/pam.21691/full>.
8. Mary Bruce, “Bipartisan Supporters Call on Congress to Reauthorize DC Voucher Program,” ABC News, September 30, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/bipartisan-supporters-call-congress-reauthorize-dc-voucher-program/story?id=8714759>; Brian O’Connell, “Free to Choose,” *American Spectator*, October 1, 2009, <http://spectator.org/articles/40795/free-choose>; and Sheryl Blunt, “Not Free to Choose: DC Students and Parents Rally for School Choice,” *Weekly Standard*, October 7, 2009, www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/017/050ikepz.asp.
9. Michael Burnbaum, “Families, Activists Rally to Restore 216 Rescinded Tuition Vouchers,” *Washington Post*, August 21, 2009, B03.
10. Trip Gabriel, “Budget Deal Fuels Revival of School Vouchers,” *New York Times*, April 14, 2011.
11. For a review of these studies, see Patrick J. Wolf, “School Voucher Programs: What the Research Says about Parental School Choice,” *Brigham Young University Law Review* 2 (2008): 415–46, <http://lawreview.byu.edu/archives/2008/2/90WOLF.FIN.pdf>. For exceptional treatments of the school voucher question that begin to address the key questions of empowerment and social justice, see Harry Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Joseph P. Viteritti, *Choosing Equality: School Choice, the Constitution, and Civil Society* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).