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Historically research on the concept of school choice and the perspective of parents partaking in the school choice process has been isolated to urban areas. However, school choice options are no longer isolated to large cities. More education options for parents in rural settings are becoming available every day. Charter schools are on the rise. Many states are providing vouchers for students to attend private schools. Even rural public school systems are now offering more magnet programs and choice options. Information on how parents in rural areas are participating in school choice is lacking. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine what factors influenced rural parents who have taken part in the school choice process. Additionally, this study is designed to learn what strategies rural school and school system leaders are using to help inform the parental decision making process.

A qualitative study design was used to determine what factors influence rural parents when making a school choice decision as well as what strategies school administrators employ in order to shape that decision. Data was collected from participants in three ways. The first way was through a semi-structured interview process. Second, each participant was emailed a copy of their interview transcript along with follow-up questions in order to gain more depth and clarity. Finally, a document analysis of all available digital media was conducted in an effort to determine how effective these efforts were in shaping the decision-making process.

The data revealed that parents are highly impacted by their previous experiences with schooling. These experiences drive parents to conduct choice work, where they analyze all of the available school options that are available to them. Through school visits and conversations with trusted friends and family members, parents include or exclude schools from their choice set before making a final school choice decision. Administrators in this study were most effective at promoting their schools through face-to-face communication despite a growing online presence. Finally, the data revealed that charter schools could possibly be driving private schools in rural areas to closure.

SCHOOL CHOICE IN RURAL NORTH CAROLINA: UNDERSTANDING PARENTS' EXPERIENCES NAVIGATING THE SCHOOL CHOICE PROCESS

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

School choice is a concept that has existed in North Carolina for over twenty years. While it has been around now for some time, it remains a hot-button topic in this state. One needs to look no further than North Carolina's "opportunity scholarship" program, which uses public funds to allow low-income families to apply for tuition assistance in the amount of $4,200 to send their children to private schools. In 2014, the first year of the program, 1,216 vouchers were awarded while the validity of the program was challenged in court. Now that the North Carolina Supreme Court has ruled the program constitutional, over 2,000 scholarships were awarded in the 2015-2016 school year (Hui, 2015). In additional to the voucher law, North Carolina is now home to two virtual charter schools that planned to enroll up to 1,500 students each in their first year of operation (Bonner, 2015). Today, parents have more options for their children's education than ever before. They can choose from public schools, charter schools, online schools, public magnet school programs, non-religious or religious private schools, and home schooling.

School choice first came into being in America during the 1980s in large urban areas across the country. A complete discussion of this movement can be found in Chapter Two. The rise of this national movement of school choice took root in free

market systems, and much of the early research on this topic reflected this philosophy. Economic principles were used by Bast and Walberg (2004) to apply the concept of Rational Choice Theory to school choice, stating, "Parents choose schools for their children based on costs and benefits, the availability of information, and the presence of opportunities" (p. 432). Researchers such as Cucchiara and Horvat (2014) and Bosetti (2004) would eventually apply a more critical lens to the concept of school choice and would begin to try to understand why parents from all walks of life made decisions to opt for schools outside of their traditional public school attendance pattern.

The school choice process for parents is not as clear-cut as Bast and Walberg had originally declared. Parents weigh many factors when choosing what they consider to be the best educational option for their children (Bell, 2009). They go through the process of creating what Bell (2009) calls their ***choice set,*** which is "the set of schools considered by parents" (p. 191). Many parents approach this topic from a very rational mindset (Bast & Walberg, 2004). They look strictly at what is the best academic option for their child and which school will provide the best "return on investment." Other parents weigh different factors, such as distance from the home, the racial makeup of the school, their sense of community, as well the financial implications that go along with including a particular school in their choice set (Bell, 2009).

The school choice process is messy and full of lots of twists and turns. Parents are impacted by many different factors that play a critical role in the final decision. Cucchiara and Horvat (2014) state, "School choice is a social process heavily weighted with meanings for its participants and frequently characterized by tensions and

negotiations between competing goals, academic and otherwise" (p. 486). These tensions and negotiations are typically influenced by five factors. They are:

- Economics
- Availability of Information/Social Networks
- Previous Experiences with a School/School System
- A Sense of Limited Choices
- Geography

Like many things in life, economics play a huge role in the school choice process. Parents look at the economics involved with enrolling their children in a particular school to determine if they can afford to send them there. This could be as simple as determining if they can afford the tuition of a private school (Bosetti, 2004) or as difficult as looking at the various hidden costs associated with including a particular school in their choice set. For example, determining how much lunch will cost at a certain school that does not participate in the federal lunch program or how much it will cost to drive their children to a school that may not offer bus transportation. Haynes, Phillips, and Goldring (2010) state, "Those who were most likely to say that location was important were those who were least likely to have the resources necessary to sustain daily transportation to and from a faraway school" (p. 764). When parents look at these economic factors, sometimes they immediately will exclude a particular school from their choice set simply because they cannot afford to send their children there.

Parents typically seek out as much information about a school as they can find in order to include it in their choice set. Information is gained through Internet

searches, recruiting materials, school visits, etc. However, one of the most powerful ways research is conducted by parents about a school is through their social networks. Social networks are defined as friends, neighbors, and other parents (Bosetti, 2004). These are the people parents talk to in order to find out information about a school that may not be available in any print or online format. These people share stories about their experiences at a particular school or even rumors they might have heard that will impact the parent's decision. These conversations are oftentimes critical to the school choice process.

A parent's previous experiences with a particular school or school system can work both for and against that particular school. If a school/school system has a reputation of starting particular programs only to switch to the "next best thing" a few years later, parents will view it as never following through with anything (McGinn, 2014). This lack of consistency can hurt a school in the eyes of parents. However, if the school typically is viewed favorably in the eyes of parents and has a reputation for success, parents will tend to include it in their choice set.

In some cases, despite the increase in the number of school choice options, many parents feel their choices are very limited. This can oftentimes be a direct result of economics or geography. In other cases, parents feel as if they have no good options from which to choose (Bell, 2009). The research indicates that this typically happens more often to poor and minority families. Bell (2009) found that many minority parents "chose amongst choice sets that were 97, 98, and 99 percent African-

American" (p. 200). This has led to the overall concern that choice programs are not truly for all students and parents.

One final factor that influences school choice is geography. It often works hand in hand with economic factors. If a school is too far away, parents typically don't include it in their choice set. They can't afford to drive their children to the school, and often they are not able to work out the logistics of transportation even when bus options are available due to their own work schedules. Geography can also have a positive impact on a particular school as well. Research has found that poor and minority families have a stronger connection to their communities, which has directly resulted in a stronger connection to their community schools. Bell (2007) states, "Understanding geography as a special phenomenon principally concerned with mileage and commute times ignores however, some of the important features of geography, in particular the meanings people assign to space and its associated features" (p. 378). Walsh (2012) supports the concept that poor and minority parents have a greater connection to their communities when he states, "Although many minority parents live in neighborhoods suburban parents might view as substandard and dangerous, many parents feel at home in these neighborhoods because they are familiar with the community" (p. 10). Even if a school does not have the greatest reputation, parents with a strong connection to their community tend to support their local schools. Given that the research indicates these parents are typically minority parents, this contributes to the segregation concerns regarding school choice. These segregation concerns will be discussed later on in depth in Chapter Two.

Another interesting phenomenon has occurred with the rise of school choice across the country. Competition for student enrollments occurs daily between public, private, and charter schools. Each student enrolled in one of these schools equates to dollars. These dollars employ teachers, provide resources, and allow the school to operate. In an effort to compete for these enrollments, schools and school systems are spending millions of dollars advertising their particular option to parents. This idea of school marketing appears to be directly in alignment with Bast and Walberg's (2004) ideas on Rational Choice Theory. According to Toppo (2012), "The USA TODAY analysis finds that 10 of the largest for-profit operators have spent an estimated $94.4 million on ads since 2007. The largest, Virginia-based K12 Inc., has spent about $21.5 million in just the first eight months of 2012" (para. 5). It is important to point out that K12 Inc. is the owner of one of the new virtual charter schools that now operates in North Carolina. It is also important to point out that the numbers quoted above do not include monies spent by public school systems, traditional charter schools, and private schools. When I hear numbers thrown around like these when it comes to school marketing, I wonder how much better all educational services could be for students if these dollars were redirected towards their benefit. I also find it interesting how quickly we quit looking at students as people and instead only look at the dollars they provide to a school or school system. When we are so focused on dollars, how are we making sure we are providing what students need? There must be some balance between recruiting students and providing the education they deserve.

On the preceding pages, I have briefly described the rise of school choice in America, research that has been conducted on how parents create their choice set, and the marketing efforts made by these various school options in an effort to impact a parent's decision. Now that this movement has spread from its origins in urban America to more rural areas, I feel the research is incomplete. My previous work in the area of school choice also fuels my interest in this topic and drives my desire to explore how parents in rural areas approach the school choice process, and how marketing efforts impact that decision.

Problem Statement

The concept of school choice is of particular interest to me, as it relates directly to the work I have previously done. In my three years as Director of School Choice Programs for a rural school system in North Carolina, I repeatedly heard from parents that they want more and different options for their children. While I have heard this, I have never really stopped and asked any of them, *why*? I have also seen the creation of the first two charter schools in the county in which I work, which has had an impact on our district's overall enrollment. This says to me that if the public schools do not offer what parents want, they will seek it elsewhere. This tends to align with Rational Choice Theory.

A wealth of research exists on the concept of school choice and the perspective of parents in urban areas. However, school choice options are no longer isolated to large cities. From my own personal experience, more education options for parents in rural settings are becoming available every day. Charter schools are on the rise. Many states

are providing vouchers for students to attend private schools. Even rural public school systems are now offering more magnet programs and choice options. In my review of the existing research, I could not find any information on school choice processes parents use in rural areas. What is needed is an understanding of the culture of school choice among rural parents to fully understand how this concept impacts parents in rural settings.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine what factors influenced rural parents who have taken part in the school choice process. From the literature, we know what factors influence parents in large urban cities. What we do not know is if these factors are at play in rural areas, or if other factors are influencing rural parents. Additionally, this study was designed to learn what strategies rural schools and school systems are using to help inform the parental decision making process. When looking at these strategies, it was important to determine if rural parents from various demographic and racial backgrounds receive these efforts in the same way and how these efforts impact their choice set. There are many options available to parents today. For the purposes of this study, I explored traditional public schools, magnet schools, charter schools, private schools, and home schools. I attempted to include parents from virtual charter schools in this study, but was unable to do so for reasons I will explain in Chapter III. The following research questions guided my study:

Research Questions

1. What factors influence rural parents when they make school choice decisions?
2. What do parents do to create their choice set?

3. What do school officials in rural public, magnet, charter, and private schools do to inform the choices of parents?
4. How could the context be shaped to make it more informative and inclusive for parents?

To answer these questions, I first used qualitative interview techniques. I interviewed parents in a rural school county who have participated in the school choice process and chose a traditional public school, magnet school, charter school, private school, or home school for their children. I looked to see what factors led them to consider a different option for their children and how they ultimately made their final decision. I also interviewed key school/school system leaders from the central office and school administration levels from this rural county to learn how they view the concept of school choice, what efforts they have made to shape parental decisions, and what they do to remain competitive in this new school choice environment.

I also conducted an analysis of any available recruitment documents, including fliers, handouts, presentations and any available digital material, such as website and social media postings. It was interesting to see how these documents have affected recruiting efforts for schools and how they have influenced parental decisions. I wanted to see what impact these documents have in shaping a parent's decision. Also, it was interesting to determine how these efforts might be tweaked in an effort to make the process more informative and inclusive for parents.

Significance of the Study

As a veteran of the public school system, I have seen firsthand the change in the environment that has taken place over the last twenty years. When I first became a school principal many years ago, we did not really hear about charter schools in the rural areas in which I worked. We knew bigger cities such as Raleigh, Greensboro, and Charlotte had a few, but we did not pay that much attention to them. We were basically the only game in town. A few kids were homeschooled, and a few went to private schools, but that was about it. It has really been in the last five to six years that school enrollments started to decline in our rural school system because of charter school enrollment. The number leaving the public school system has increased every year since then. Now with the creation of two charter schools within our county's borders, the rate at which students have left has increased exponentially. As the students have left, so have funds for the school system, which has translated directly into a reduction in our workforce. I have watched as positions have been cut year after year, and teachers have been forcefully transferred from one school to the next in an effort to keep as many people employed as possible. Teacher assistants and librarians have been cut. We constantly have to do more with less. It has been heartbreaking to watch as our legislature has continued to divert funds from public schools to support these other options. They champion these new programs as the solution for failing public schools. However, I've always felt if we were given the same support we could perform much better.

As this movement of school choice arose, I have had many professional opportunities to create our own system of choices within the school system. I designed and was the first principal of our Early College High School. After four years of serving in this role, I transitioned to be the first Director of School Choice Programs. My superintendent at the time wanted more options across the district, especially at schools with very low enrollment numbers and in the general geographical location of the largest charter school in the county. While I no longer serve in this role, I enjoyed implementing STEM, arts, and leadership programs across the county, as well a creating a specialty magnet school that focuses on struggling students during this time. However, I was always conscious of the fact that I never wanted these programs to segregate students. Also, I never wanted to make a school that did not have a choice program seem like it was a lesser school. It was a delicate balancing act that has not been without its own bumps in the road along the way.

I have learned throughout this journey that while many parents want options, other do not. The same can be said for school/school system leaders. I am of the opinion that school choice is a concept that is here to stay. It is not going anywhere anytime soon. Given this, it is important to me that there is equity within the choices and that all of them provide a quality education for all children. This is why I am so passionate about this topic and want to better understand all the intricacies of school choice and its impact on students, parents, and schools.

Summary and Overview

Chapter I began with a brief overview of the rise of school choice. This movement took root in large urban areas in the 1980s and has now expanded to more rural parts of the country. Researchers first connected Rational Choice Theory to this movement, describing school choice the same way one would describe a financial transaction. Other researchers would go on to describe the emotional side of school choice and how parents weigh many different factors when making their decision. As school choice has grown, so have efforts by various schools and school systems to influence a parent's decision through marketing. There is an incredible amount of competition for student enrollments today.

The chapter goes on to describe my personal connection to the school choice movement. This connection as well as my experience over the last twenty years of watching the political landscape shift in favor of choices and away from the traditional public school system drives my desire to research this topic further. Chapter II will take a much deeper look at the existing school choice literature as well as outline the theoretical framework for this study.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to School Choice

While school choice appears to be a fairly new topic, the concept has existed as long we have had an education system in this country. According to the Parents for Choice in Education (n.d.):

> Thomas Jefferson proposed a statewide education system in which the secondary schools would be funded primarily by student tuition, with government scholarships for poor students. Thomas Paine argued that government should pay private-school tuition for families too poor to afford an education for their children—the equivalent of vouchers. In Paine's system, government could fund education (thus ensuring that all students get the chance to learn) without actually owning or running schools. (para. 4)

Throughout my analysis of school choice literature, a common rationale for the existence of school choice models has appeared. Parents do not want the government to dictate to them what is best for their children's education. They do not want to be told where their children have to go to school. Carpenter (2003) stated, "All parents should have the power to choose the best and safest schools for their children, period" (para. 7). Most of this sentiment comes from a distrust of government bureaucracy. The idea that this bureaucracy is destroying our public schools has not gone unnoticed by politicians, and they use this sentiment to push their agenda. In championing a recent North Carolina Supreme Court ruling on a school voucher case, Senate President Pro Tem Phil Berger

said, “This ruling makes clear that parents, not education bureaucrats or politicians, ought to be able to choose the educational pathway best suited to their children’s needs” (Binker, 2015, para. 17). I find it interesting the very people responsible for the bureaucracy use its existence to divert funds away from public schools.

Early on, parents opted for private schools to maintain their freedom to choose. In the last few decades, a new option, charter schools, emerged as another educational opportunity designed to escape the bureaucratic control of the government. In describing the origins of charter schools, Karp (2013) states, “They were originally conceived as teacher-run schools that would serve students struggling inside the traditional system and would operate outside the reach of the administrative bureaucracy and politicized big city school boards” (para. 5). Over the years, the charter school movement has swept across the country and is championed by politicians from both parties as one of the cures for a broken public education system (Reckhow et al., 2015).

Nationally, according to Kafer (2012), “Public school choice grew in the late sixties when the first magnet school opened its doors” (para. 3). The movement grew even faster in the eighties with, “The first dual-enrollment program, the first tax credit for education expenses, and the legalization of home schooling in most states” (Kafer, 2012, para. 4). Kafer (2012) goes on to say, “During the 1990s, states across the country enacted public charter school laws, tax credits, and voucher programs” (para. 5). The American Federation for Children (n.d.) indicates, “Today, there are 41 private school choice programs serving more than 308,000 children across the nation. These programs exist in 20 states and the District of Columbia and Douglas County, Colorado” (para. 3).

In looking at the most recent administration, former President Obama has been a proponent of charter schools, thus aiding in the continued growth of this school option. Russell (2016) captured this quote from the President:

> With the flexibility to develop new methods for educating our youth, and to develop remedies that could help underperforming schools, these innovative and autonomous public schools often offer lessons that can be applied in other institutions of learning across our country, including in traditional public schools. (para. 2)

While President Obama is pro-charter school, according to Strauss (2014), "The Obama administration has steadfastly opposed vouchers" (para. 2). Current President Trump and Vice President Pence are very pro-voucher. According to Saul (2016), "Mr. Trump's signature education proposal—to provide $20 billion in federal money to allow low-income students to select private or charter schools—is one area where he seems to be borrowing policy from Vice President-elect Mike Pence" (para. 6). President Trump has selected Betsy DeVos to be Secretary of Education. According to Rizga (2016), in the state of Michigan, "The DeVoses were the biggest financial backers of the effort to oppose any new state oversight of charters" (para. 12). Rizga goes on to say, "Perhaps even more than her push for charter schools, Betsy DeVos is known as a fierce advocate for the expansion of vouchers" (para. 14).

As school choice options have spread across the country, more researchers have begun to look at who is choosing these various options. While choice has been heralded as providing options for all families, it appears the definition of "all" is quite limited. Many of these options do not provide bus transportation. Others do not provide free or

reduced price meals. This greatly limits poor families from considering these schools. While voucher programs offer some tuition assistance for poor families, they do not cover the full cost of attendance at private schools in many cases. Additionally, income eligibility levels for voucher programs in many parts of the country have constantly risen to the point that many families who can afford to send their children to private schools without assistance now qualify and are taking these opportunities away from families who cannot make up that difference in cost. Public schools have begun to offer their own version of choice, magnet schools, as an answer to the growing charter and voucher movement. However, many of these options have been questioned as to their ability to provide opportunities for all children.

My review of the literature has revealed three essential themes that are necessary for understanding school choice. First, I will explore the growth of school choice in North Carolina and the policies that have supported that growth. It is important to understand how school choice has evolved in this state over the last twenty years as well as the policies that have allowed parents to explore more educational options. Next, I will analyze how parents engage in the school choice process. This includes an analysis of the theories surrounding school choice and arguments for and against some of those theories. I will also explain the various factors that go into the development of a parent's choice set. Finally, I will examine the growing concerns of racial, socioeconomic, and linguistic segregation due to the rise of these options. Are choices being created in a way that gives everyone options, or is choice only for the select few? It is crucial to

understand how policy and proximity are leading to more segregated schools and how parents are beginning to demand more diverse schools.

The Growth of School Choice in North Carolina

North Carolina's first charter school law passed in 1996, but its passage was aided by events dating back to 1994. According to Stoops (2010):

> In 1994, North Carolina Republicans enjoyed the electoral benefits of the nationwide revival of American conservatism. For the first time since the Civil War, a Republican majority took control of the North Carolina House of Representatives. Republicans also made significant gains in the state Senate. Shortly after this overwhelming victory, the leaders of the new House majority initiated an ambitious education agenda that included consideration of a number of parent-centered reforms, including vouchers, tax credits, and charter schools (para. 3).

Since the writing of Stoops's article, the state of North Carolina has seen all the parent-centered reforms he mentioned come to fruition. This shift in the political climate has created a number of school options for North Carolina parents.

Charter schools. Charter schools are public schools. They receive state funding just like traditional public schools. However, they operate independently from the school systems in which they are located. Separate boards govern them, and they have more legislated freedom than traditional public schools. In many cases, these schools do not provide transportation or free/reduced lunch options. Students do not have to live in the county/school district in which the charter school is located in order to attend. Admission to these schools is typically achieved through an application and subsequently a lottery process when the school has reached its enrollment capacity (Medley, 2014).

When the legislation first passed, caps were put in place to limit the number of charter schools in the state to one hundred. Enrollment growth per year at each school was also capped at ten percent. According to Ladd et al. (2015), "In 2010, the state secured $400 million in federal Race to the Top funds by promising, among other things, to raise the charter school cap" (p. 5). The cap limiting the number of charter schools was removed in 2011 with legislation signed into law by Governor Perdue (Parents for Educational Freedom in North Carolina, n.d.). There is no longer a limit to the number of charter schools operating in the state (Stoops, 2010). Today, there are over 150 charter schools. Additionally, enrollment growth caps were increased from ten to twenty percent.

An interesting phenomenon has taken place since the removal of the school cap. Many new charters have encountered challenges meeting their projected enrollment figures. For example, in Charlotte, 11 new charter schools were expected to open during the 2014–2015 school year. According to Dunn (2014), "The Charlotte STEM Academy pulled the plug on its opening over the summer" (para. 10). He goes on to describe another charter school closing:

> Concrete Roses STEM Academy told parents last week that it would suddenly shut. The school had originally projected 560 students in its first year, and later was funded by the state for 300 students. Only 126 students ended up attending. (para. 11)

Several other new charter schools are facing similar challenges. Many are struggling to enroll enough students to meet their projections. Despite this occurrence

repeating itself across the state, 11 additional charter schools, as well the first two virtual charter schools in North Carolina opened in the fall of 2015.

Virtual charter schools. A new version of charter schools, virtual charter schools, has arrived in North Carolina. Two virtual charters, NC Virtual Academy and NC Connections Academy, were approved to open as part of a four-year pilot program in the fall of 2015. The State Board of Education approved these schools after it was ordered by the State Legislature to approve two schools for the pilot program. According to Bonner (2015):

> N.C. Virtual Academy, which is affiliated with K12, Inc., and N.C. Connections Academy, which is working with education conglomerate Pearson, were the only two that applied. They will each be able to enroll up to 1,500 students in their first year. (para. 3)

Both virtual charter schools are connected with private businesses. This means the funds that would normally flow to a public school for the enrollment of these children will now flow to these companies

K12, Inc. operates in several states and has been shrouded in controversy. Mathis and Miron, in a 2012 report for the National Education Policy Center, released these key findings:

- Math scores for K12 Inc.'s students are 14 to 36 percent lower than scores for other students in the states in which the company operates schools.
- Only 27.7 percent of K12 Inc.'s schools reported meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards in 2010-11, compared to 52% for brick-and-mortar schools in the nation as a whole.
- Student attrition is exceptionally high in K12 Inc. and other virtual schools. Many families appear to approach the virtual schools as a temporary service: Data in K12 Inc.'s own school performance report indicate that 31% of

> parents intend to keep their students enrolled for a year or less, and more than half intend to keep their students enrolled for two years or less.
> - K12 Inc.'s schools spend more on overall instructional costs than comparison schools—including the cost of computer hardware and software, but noticeably less on teachers' salaries and benefits.
> - K12 Inc. spends little or nothing on facilities and maintenance, transportation, and food service.
> - K12 Inc. enrolls students with disabilities at rates moderately below public school averages; although this enrollment has been increasing, but the company spends half as much per pupil as charter schools overall spend on special education instruction and a third of what districts spend on special education instruction. (para. 9)

In 2014, Dorothy Bedortha, a former teacher for K12, Inc., provided a great deal of insight into her experience as a virtual teacher. She says about that experience:

> For most of last year I was Lead Teacher at the school, which required me to attend national staff meetings each week. At first the marketing focus of the conversations turned my stomach, and then it made me furious. In my experience, the conversation was never about how our students were struggling, how we could support those who were trying to learn the English Language, how we could support those who were homeless or how we could support those with special needs. It was never about how we could support our teachers. It seemed to me like the focus was often about enrollment, about data, about numbers of students who had not taken the proper number of tests, about ranking schools and ranking teachers. And there was marketing: how to get more children enrolled, how to reach more families, how to be sure they were pre-registered for next year, how to get Facebook pages and other marketing information "pushed out" to students. (para. 7)

North Carolina Connections Academy is the second virtual charter school to open this fall. The Connections Academy Company operates virtual charter schools in many states. In 2011, the company was bought by Pearson Education (Horn, 2011). Horn goes on to say the following about the acquisition:

> The challenge for Pearson now is can they manage the "innovator's dilemma" properly and maintain their leadership in this industry, or will they have acquired a disruptive company only to let the mainstream business take its assets and kill its distinctive processes and priorities (para. 5)

While Pearson's virtual charters continue to expand and increase in popularity, it appears Horn fears the model would "kill its distinctive processes and priorities" (para. 5) has come true. Many of the same concerns regarding K12, Inc. and their ability to operate virtual schools can be found with Pearson Connections. According to Sourcewatch (n.d.), "Connections Academy and other online schools consistently fail to meet academic standards at the level of brick-and-mortar public schools. Data show that virtual students trail traditional students by almost every academic metric" (para. 14).

Stories like this, as well as K12, Inc.'s history of poor performance were a point of concern for the State Board of Education. According to Bonner (2015), "Board member John Tate of Charlotte said he couldn't vote for N.C. Virtual Academy, considering K12's history" (para. 6). However, despite these concerns, the Board eventually approved N.C. Virtual Academy to open in the fall of 2015. Given that only two companies proposed virtual charters, and the legislature required the approval of virtual schools in 2015, there was no other option.

Public school system/charter school partnerships. While the relationship between traditional public schools and charter schools in North Carolina is seen as somewhat competitive, this is not the case in other states. In Texas, the Spring Branch Independent School District (ISD) has partnered with two area charter schools, KIPP Houston and YES Prep, to form the SKY Partnership (Spring Branch ISD, 2015). This

partnership benefits all three organizations in different ways. The Spring Branch ISD website (2015) describes the partnership in the following way:

> The model is a simple, yet powerful one-open KIPP and YES Prep programs within two existing SBISD middle schools and their feeder high school and offer these college-preparatory programs as an option to all. KIPP and YES Prep can access resources and extracurricular activities that they would not otherwise be able to offer their students. This model also allows these high-preforming charter organizations to serve more students, more quickly, due to sharing publicly funded buildings. For SBISD, the presence of KIPP and YES Prep within its schools supports the college-going climate the district is nurturing while giving the district's students more educational options. (para. 2)

The schools share much more than spaces and resources. They have formed a collaborative network of educators that share best practices among and between each school, helping each teacher to grow and become better at their craft. Whitney (2015) describes the goal of this partnership is to "share best practices and lessons learned on a wider scale" (para. 8). The SKY Partnership is an example of how charter schools and traditional public schools can work together for the benefit of all children.

Competition. Since their arrival in North Carolina nearly twenty years ago, charter schools have had a major impact on traditional public schools. The two organizations have competed to enroll students and obtain the resources that come with these enrollments. During the 2014-2015 school year, there were over 69,000 students enrolled in charter schools in North Carolina (Xing, Maugeri, Pierson, & Reitano, 2015). Funding for charter schools in North Carolina now exceeds $255 million (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2014).

While other school systems in other states have embraced charter schools and formed partnerships with them, as in the case with the SKY Partnership, the relationship between school systems and charter schools in this state remains adversarial. One way in which school systems are competing with charter schools is by developing their own choices from within. More and more school systems are introducing magnet schools as another form of public school choice.

Magnet schools. Another form of school choice, magnet schools, has gained popularity in North Carolina over the years. According to Chen (2015), "Magnet schools first came into being in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a tool to further academic desegregation in large urban school districts. Magnets were intended to attract students from across different school zones" ("History of magnet schools," para. 1).

Magnet schools typically provide some sort of specialized instruction. According to the Magnet Schools of America (n.d.) website:

> Magnet schools are free public elementary and secondary schools of choice that are operated by school districts or a consortium of districts. Magnet schools have a focused theme and aligned curricula in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), Fine and Performing Arts, International Baccalaureate, International Studies, MicroSociety, Career and Technical Education (CTE), World Languages (immersion and non-immersion) and many others. Magnet schools are typically more "hands on—minds on" and use an approach to learning that is inquiry or performance/project based. They use state, district, or Common Core standards in all subject areas; however, they are taught within the overall theme of the school. (para. 1)

Magnet schools typically serve a student population based on its assigned attendance zone, but students from other attendance zones may also attend the school for the specific program they offer. Some magnet schools do not have a traditional

attendance zone. Schools created in this fashion allow any student within the county/school district to attend. Admission is achieved through an application and lottery process. Transportation may or may not be provided (Magnet Schools of America, n.d.).

A popular form of magnet school in this state is the Early College High School. According to the North Carolina New Schools (n.d.) website, "The target population for early colleges is first-generation college-goers, those at-risk of dropping out or other historically underserved populations" (para. 1). These schools are high schools that are partnered with a community college or university. They are typically located on their campus. Over the course of a 4- or 5-year program of study, students earn their high school diploma and an Associate's Degree or up to two years of college transfer credit. Many of these schools are located in rural North Carolina counties. These schools typically do not have a set attendance zone, outside of the county/school district parameters. Admission is typically achieved through an application process (NC New Schools, n.d.).

Reports around the country have appeared concerning whether magnet schools are adhering to their original mission, which was to increase diversity and decrease segregation. One such report was issued by Taboada (2015). She states,

> In three of the district's four magnet programs, fewer than a quarter of the students are Hispanic, while Latinos make up 60 percent of the district's student body. Even fewer low-income students are admitted to magnet schools, and black students made up just 1 percent in two of the schools. (para. 2)

As magnet schools have grown in popularity, they have also created more competitive application processes. The applications, according to Taboada (2015),

"include grades, scores on state-mandated tests, student essays, letters of recommendation from teachers, and entrance exams conducted on Saturdays" (para. 11). In many ways, the application process has become a barrier for poor and minority students who may not have the same level of parental support at home to help them complete it. These same application procedures are occurring across the state, and many districts are seeing similar results in their magnet schools as well.

Private schools. Private schools receive no public funding. Typically, these schools charge tuition and other fees in order to cover operation expenses. Many of these schools are associated with churches or place emphasis on a particular religion and require study of that religion in its curriculum. Because these schools are not state-supported, they have the freedom to govern themselves provided they meet certain requirements. According to the North Carolina Division of Non-Public Education (North Carolina Department of Administration [NC DOA], n.d.b), there are 13 requirements to operate a private school in this state. They are:

1. Report its name, address, and names of its chief administrator and owner(s) to the Division of Non-Public Education.
2. Meet the fire, safety and sanitation standards established by state and local authorities.
3. Follow certain requirements to ensure that the school buildings meet the applicable asbestos regulations.
4. Operate for a school term of at least nine calendar months on a regular schedule excluding reasonable holidays and vacations. (DNPE strongly advises a school term of at least 180 school days; typical school days of at least 5 1/2 hours in length; and, typical class periods for grade 9-12 students of 50 minutes each.)
5. Keep accurate student attendance records on file at its office.
6. Maintain current and accurate disease immunization records on file at its office for each pupil enrolled.

7. Administer to all students in grades 3, 6 and 9 each school year, a nationally standardized achievement test in the subject areas of English grammar, reading, spelling and math
8. Administer to all grade 11 students each school year, a nationally standardized test which measures competencies in the verbal and quantitative areas
9. Issue Driving Eligibility Certificates to its age 15-17 students who are making progress toward graduation, exhibiting exemplary behavior and who request them in order to obtain their North Carolina Learner's Permit/Driver's License.
10. Provide industrial quality eye protective devices free of charge to students and teachers participating in shop or laboratory classes involving hazardous materials and require the students and teachers to wear the devices at all times when participating in such a program along with visitors to such shops and laboratories while such programs are in progress.
11. Notify DNPE upon termination of the school.
12. Satisfy childcare requirements, which may apply if a nursery or pre-kindergarten program is also operated.
13. Also, satisfy foster care requirements which may apply if the school exists primarily to meet the special needs including the education of "dependent, neglected, abused, abandoned, destitute, orphaned, undisciplined or delinquent children or other children, who, due to similar problems of behavior or family conditions, are living apart from their parents, relatives or guardians in family foster homes or residential care facilities." Foster care requirements may be obtained by contacting your county government social services office. (para. 1)

From this list, it is clear to see that these schools are required to meet certain safety and reporting requirements. However, there are no requirements to specify the curriculum the school will use. They also do not have the same requirements as public schools to hire highly qualified teachers. While they have some testing requirements, the level of accountability for test scores falls well short of the level required for public and charter schools. This lack of accountability was a point of contention in the court case over the use of vouchers in this state. Vouchers, also known as Opportunity Scholarships in many states, provide state funds to families to be used to pay for private school tuition.

In North Carolina, the State Education Assistance Authority operates the voucher program. According to their website (2015), students must meet the following criteria in order to participate in the program:

> The student must meet all of these four criteria:
>
> 1. Live in a household that meets the Income Eligibility Guidelines established by the Program;
> 2. Enroll in a participating nonpublic school in North Carolina;
> 3. Not have received a high school diploma; and
> 4. Be 5 on or before August 31, 2015.
>
> And the student must meet one of the following criteria:
>
> 1. Be assigned to and attend a North Carolina public school for at least 75 school days the previous semester (spring 2015);
> 2. Have received an Opportunity Scholarship during the previous school year (2014-15);
> 3. Be entering kindergarten or the first grade;
> 4. Be a foster child; or
> 5. Have been adopted within the last year (p. 1)

Income eligibility guidelines are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

2015-2016 Income Eligibility Requirements for Opportunity Scholarships

Persons in Household	Maximum Income for Full Tuition (up to $4,200)	Maximum Income for 90% of the Tuition or $4,200, whichever is less
2	$29,471	$39,196
3	$37,167	$49,341
4	$44,863	$59,667
5	$52,559	$69,903
6	$60,255	$80,138
7	$67,951	$90,374
8	$75,647	$100,610

(State Education Assistance Authority, 2015, p. 7)

A simpler way to explain the chart above was provided by the Friedman Foundation (n.d.):

> For the first year of the program, students are eligible to receive vouchers if they reside in a household that qualifies for the federal free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) program . . . If the program is funded in future years, eligibility increases to households with incomes up to 133 percent of the FRL program (para. 2).

From this explanation, we can see that the state already has plans to increase eligible income levels from the first to the second year. In states that have had voucher programs for a number of years, the trend has been to continue to increase income eligibility levels. Persson (2015) reports,

> The income requirement for Milwaukee was upped to 300 percent of the poverty level. A married couple with two children can currently earn $78,637—far more than the median U.S. family income of $52,250—and still send them off to private schools at the public's expense. (para. 16)

Increases in eligible income are not isolated to Milwaukee. Indiana, Florida, and Georgia have seen their income levels increase dramatically (Persson, 2015). As these levels rise, so does the concern that the program will publicly fund the segregation of our schools.

Soon after the first voucher funds were distributed in North Carolina in the fall of 2014, reports began to surface that created quite a stir. Wagner (2014b) reported, "Religious private schools account for 90 percent of those receiving the state's new taxpayer-funded school vouchers—a disproportionately high amount given that only 66.4 percent of the state's 715 private schools are religious institutions" (para. 1). Many have

argued that the use of state funds to send students to religious private schools is a violation of the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment of the Constitution. This was argued in North Carolina in ***Richardson v. State, 2015.*** With such a disproportionate number of religious private schools receiving voucher funds in North Carolina, this has only added to the controversy.

Another troubling issue regarding religious private schools that are eligible to receive voucher funds deals with policies that exclude families from applying. One such example is Myrtle Grove Christian School in Wilmington, North Carolina. According to a WECT (2013) report, "Parents were sent a letter saying the school had adopted a biblical morality policy to be signed by all families applying for admission or reenrolling at MGC beginning in 2014-15" (para. 5). This policy includes language that allows the school to refuse admission to gay students and their families. The actual policy reads as follows:

> The school reserves the right, within its sole discretion, to refuse admission of an applicant or to discontinue enrollment of a student if the atmosphere or conduct within a particular home or the activities of the student are counter to or are in opposition to the biblical lifestyle the school teaches. This includes, but is not necessarily limited to, participating in, supporting, or affirming sexual immorality, homosexual activity, or bisexual activity; promoting such practices; or being unable to support the moral principles of the school. (para. 4)

While Myrtle Grove is eligible to receive voucher funds from the state, it currently has no voucher students. According to Baird (2013), the headmaster of the school announced, shortly after distributing the new policy to parents, "Myrtle Grove Christian School will not accept state funding from a new General Assembly school

tuition voucher program" (para. 1). However, there is nothing keeping the school from changing its decision and to begin accepting voucher students. A more troubling quote from Baird (2013) is, "Such biblical morality policies, as they're called, aren't uncommon at religious private schools." While the Opportunity Scholarship program was introduced as a way to expand choice for all families, it appears the definition of "all" is rather limited by the policies religious private schools have in place.

The Greensboro Islamic Academy received the greatest number of vouchers in 2014, with 43. Wagner (2014a) discovered that the school "was in financial trouble during the last school year, pleading for help from the public online to fund its $150,000 shortfall so the school could complete the 2013-14 school year" ("State received," para. 1). She goes on to state,

> On its 2012–13 student application form, GIA listed tuition rates of $2,850 per student, per year for class sizes fewer than 10. Students who were part of larger class sizes were offered a lower rate of $1,950. [For] 2014–15, tuition rates . . . increased by 120 percent for those in larger class sizes, to $4,360/year. ("Tuition inflation?," paras. 5–6)

From this report, it is clear to see why so many people have been concerned about this entanglement between religious private schools and the state government. It seems quite obvious that the Greensboro Islamic Academy raised the cost of tuition in order to receive the full amount of the voucher for the 43 children coming to their school. This would also help alleviate the $150,000 shortfall the school seems to have from year to year. After reading this article, I share Wagner's concern, when she writes about the possibility of this school, or another school failing to continue operations (p. 5). It is

obvious, from their own admission, that the Greensboro Islamic Academy has had financial issues in the past. Wagner quotes Orr when he states, "If a school fails, there will be no money to be sent back and I see nothing in the legislation that allows the state to recover it once the money is spent" (as cited in Wagner, 2014, "Recovering the funds," para. 4). There seems to be little oversight of these funds and nearly no accountability required of the schools that receive them.

Superior Court Judge Robert Hobgood found the North Carolina voucher program to be unconstitutional. In a WRAL report he stated, "The General Assembly fails the children of North Carolina when they are sent with public, taxpayer money to private schools that have no legal obligation to teach them anything" (Burns & Leslie, 2014, para. 20). The judge also referenced the ongoing ***Leandro*** case, which states the General Assembly is required to provide a sound, basic education to all students. He reasoned that there is no guarantee of this in private schools, where there is no government regulation or mandated curriculum. On July 23rd, 2015, the North Carolina Supreme Court ruled in a 4-3 decision that the state's voucher program is indeed constitutional (Binker, 2015). During the 2014-2015 school year, the General Assembly set aside $10 million for the voucher program. In the 2015-2016 school year, the General Assembly expanded the program's budget to $17.6 million (Parents for Educational Freedom in North Carolina, 2015). At the same time our state's leaders increase funding for vouchers, they continue to cut funds from traditional public schools.

Home schools. Home schools have been in operation in North Carolina for a number of years. According to the NC DOA:

> North Carolina law defines a home school as a non public school consisting of the children of not more than two families or households, where the parents or legal guardians or members of either household determine the scope and sequence of the academic instruction, provide academic instruction, and determine additional sources of academic instruction. (n.d.a, para. 1)

There are very few regulations when it comes to home school in North Carolina. In fact, the North Carolinians for Home Education website (n.d.), states, "In the late '80s a small group of concerned parents helped pass a law making NC one the most homeschooling-friendly states in the nation" (para. 1). Below is a list of requirements to operate a home school in North Carolina:

- Hold at least a high school diploma or its equivalent.
- Send to DNPE a Notice of Intent to Operate a Home School. The notice must include the name and address of the school along with the name of the school's owner and chief administrator.
- Elect to operate under either Part 1 or Part 2 of Article 39 of the North Carolina General Statutes as a religious or as a non-religious school.
- Operate the school "on a regular schedule, excluding reasonable holidays and vacations, during at least nine calendar months of the year."
- Maintain at the school disease immunization and annual attendance records for each student.
- Have a nationally standardized achievement test administered annually to each student. The test must involve the subject areas of English grammar, reading, spelling, and mathematics. Records of the test results must be retained at the home school for at least one year and made available to DNPE when requested.
- Notify DNPE when the school is no longer in operation. (NC DOA, n.d., para. 3)

Parents have many reasons why they choose to opt for the home school route. The Coalition for Responsible Home Education conducted a survey in 2011 to see why parents chose to home school. Their results are shown in Figure 1.

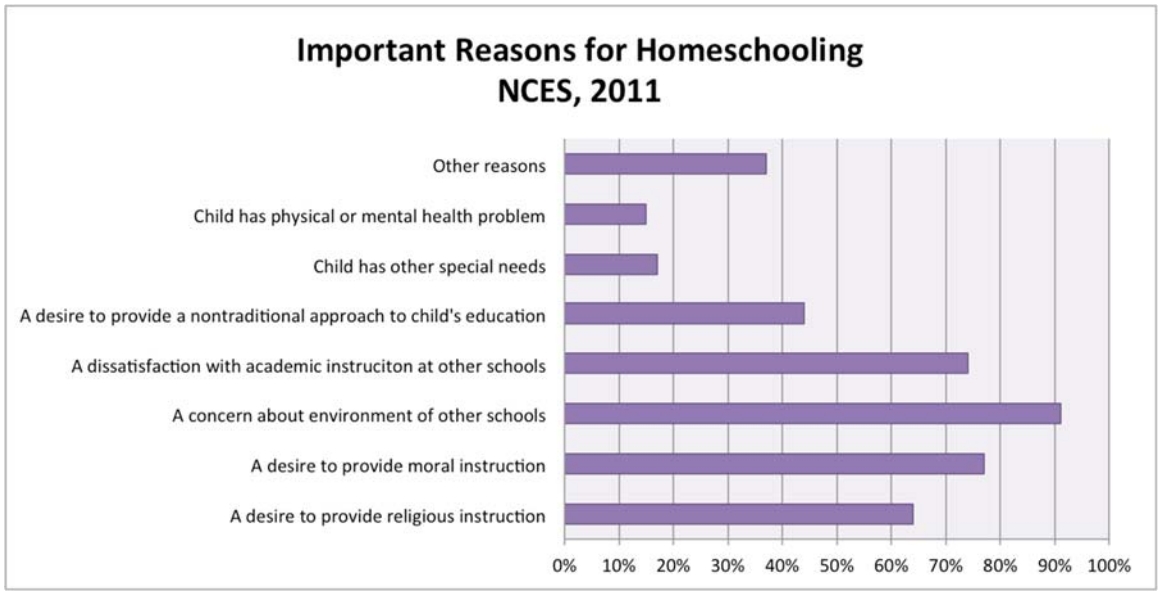

Figure 1. Reasons for Homeschooling.

From Figure 1, one can see that parents generally have negative feelings toward other types of schools, whether it was concerns about academics, the environment, or the morals of the school. Many also decide to home school for religious purposes as well.

In North Carolina today, parents have an array of choices for their children's education. In many cases, they have a number of options within their public school system, including traditional public schools and various magnet programs. There are also a number of charter schools that exist throughout the state. If a parent would like to enroll in a charter school but there is not one close enough to them, there are now two virtual options as well. While private schools have not been viewed as an option for all, given the various costs that are associated with their enrollment, the purpose of the voucher program is to make this option more accessible to families of a lower income level. So how does a parent choose a school for their child from amongst all of these

options? This can be complicated, confusing, and messy for some parents. In the next section of my literature review, I will describe the processes in which parents choose a school option for their children.

An Analysis of the School Choice Process

Much of the early research on school choice was based in free market systems and economic strategy. Some of the early major authors in this research were Bast and Walberg (2004), who applied Rational Choice Theory to the concept of school choice. Rational Choice Theory is purely an economic concept, which has three basic tenets:

1. Human beings base their behavior on rational calculations.
2. They act with rationality when making choices.
3. Their choices are aimed at optimization of their pleasure or profit. (para. 1)

Bast and Walberg continue in this style of writing by considering children a commodity, and as such parents will choose the best school for them. They say, "Parents have incentives to invest in their children for much the same reason as they invest in other durable goods" (p. 433). In their research, they find that academics are the main reasons why parents choose different schools. They state, "Parents put academic achievement at the top of their list of concerns when choosing a school, meaning they are presumably acting in their children's long-term best interest" (p. 438).

Since Bast and Walberg's report, there has been a wealth of research published that challenges Rational Choice Theory. Cucchiara and Horvat (2014) state that "School choice is a social process heavily weighted with meanings for its participants and frequently characterized by tensions and negotiations between competing goals, academic

and otherwise" (p. 486). Bosetti (2004) states, "The context of parental decision-making is far more complex than the result of individual calculations of the economic return of their investment in particular education options" (p. 388).

Choice work. To better understand who chooses to participate in the school choice process, one must become familiar with the concept of "choice work." André-Bechely (1999) describes choice work in the following way, "Choice work consists of the actual activities in which parents engage during the school choice process – for example, gathering information about schools, talking with people about schools, visiting schools, and completing the applications for the school of choice" (p. 269). From the activities that go into choice work, parents develop a "choice set."

Choice set. Another major researcher in the area of school choice, Courtney A. Bell, created the concept of the choice set. In her research (2009), she described the choice set simply as "The set of schools considered by parents" (p. 191). While the definition is quite simple, the factors that make up the choice set are very complicated. Some of these factors are:

- Economic Factors
- Availability of Information/Social Networks
- Previous Experiences with a School/School System
- A Sense of Limited Choices
- Geography

In the paragraphs that follow, I will explain how each factor impacts the creation of the choice set in greater detail.

Economic factors. Economics play a large role in the creation of the choice set. The costs associated with attending a private school limit a number of parents from placing these schools in their choice set. Bosetti (2004) discovered, "Non-religious private schools appear to attract students from families with higher socio-economic status. This in part can be attributed to the tuition fees, which range from $6,000 to $12,000 per year (p. 392). Haynes et al. (2010) support these findings in their work with Latino choosers when they found "well educated-Latinos often value education but are unable to afford private school options" (p. 775). The cost of tuition at some private schools, even with the availability of vouchers, immediately eliminates this option for a number of parents.

Another way economics impacts school choice is the cost associated with transportation, especially if a parent is considering a school that does not offer it. If parents cannot provide transportation to and from a school, they are more likely to leave that school out of their choice set and opt for a more convenient school. Haynes et al. (2010) state, "Those who were most likely to say that location was important were those who were least likely to have the resources necessary to sustain daily transportation to and from a faraway school" (p. 764).

One final way economics influences the school choice decision is the availability of free or reduced lunches. Many charter schools do not participate in these programs. In fact, both of the charter schools in the county for which I work do not. Lunch is made available through various catering agreements with area restaurants, and parents must pay for these lunches up front. In one school, students

must pay for the entire quarter at one time. Obviously, it is difficult for parents who depend on free or reduced price meals to include these schools in their choice set.

Availability of information/social networks. In order for parents to include a particular school in their choice set, they typically gather a great deal of information about it. Information is gained through Internet searches, recruiting materials, school visits, etc. However, one of the most powerful ways research is conducted by parents about a school is through their social networks. Social networks are defined as friends, neighbors, and other parents (Bosetti, 2004). These are the people a parent engages in the school choice process and can access easily.

Since parents rely so heavily on the information available to them by the people that are most convenient for them to access, it is easy to understand how school choice has been linked to issues regarding a lack of diversity. Bell (2009) states, "As parents set about constructing their choice sets and determining which school might be best for their child, they do so in a segregated, stratified context" (p. 193). Through her research she discovered:

> Overall, middle-class parents' social networks put them in contact with a higher proportion of non-failing, selective, and tuition-based schools than did poor and working-class parents' networks . . . Working-class and poor parents also talked about schooling and schools with people in their networks; however, the characteristics of those schools differed substantively. (p. 202)

Knowing that parents are heavily influenced during the school choice process by the amount of information that is available to them, it is crucial for schools to make sure

information is easily accessible. They must also adapt their methods of delivery in order to reach all populations, not just the select few.

Previous experiences with a school/school system. A parent's previous experience with a particular school or school system can play a major part in determining if a school is a part of the choice set. If that previous experience is a negative one, parents will surely not include it as a viable option. Bell (2009) supports this idea when she describes a participant in her study:

> After thinking about her own experience being forced to go to a high school she did not want to attend and the risks involved in forcing her son to do the same, Mrs. Bordon allowed her son to opt out of the customary pattern (p. 204).

Many of these experiences revolve around academic issues. In a number of studies, parents indicate that academics are their top priority when choosing a school. Haynes et al. (2010) reported, "Analyses of parents' priorities in participating in the school-choice process indicate that academic factors are, on average, the most important priority" (p. 778). Results of this type align well within the principles of Rational Choice Theory.

Many parents choose options for their students due to an overall negative view of public schools. McGinn (2014) found, "stakeholders were somewhat suspicious of new programs in the district, as initiatives tend to come and go" (p. 179). Several, if not all, school systems are guilty of not giving various programs the opportunity to develop before moving on to the newest trend in education reform. This makes parents skeptical of them, increasing their chances of making different choices. Haynes et al. (2010)

discovered, "All parents who apply to magnet schools, regardless of ethnicity, tend to feel that regular public schools are more mediocre than magnet schools" (p. 780). In her research of charter school parents, Villavicencio (2013) states, "Charter parents do not necessarily choose higher performing charter schools; nor do they necessarily leave low performing charter schools" (p. 1). She also stated, "These schools (charter schools) were still in these parents' perceptions better than their public school options" (p. 16).

Statements like these do not mean the only students in traditional public schools today are parents who had no options. Quite the opposite is true. Bell (2009) states that parents who have engaged in the school choice and chose public schools are "confident that the school in the customary enrollment pattern was what they wanted, and were sure that other schools would not be able to offer what the customary school did" (p. 198). As evidenced by the literature, very strong feelings for and against certain types of schools develop in parents based on their previous experiences. Knowing this, as well as how important social networks are to the school choice process, it is important for all schools to do their best to make those experiences as positive as possible.

A sense of limited options. In her work, Bell (2009) states, "In addition to the well-documented constraints of income, information, and transportation, the resources used to construct choice sets may further constrain the schools parents consider" (p. 191). Here, Bell is saying that school systems are failing to give minority and poor parents what would be considered a "good" option to choose. In many documented cases, these minority and poor families live in large urban areas, and all of the presumed better choices of schools are located far away in the suburbs, leaving them to choose between a

few schools lacking a diverse population. Bell (2009) found that many minority parents "chose amongst choice sets that were 97, 98, and 99 percent African-American" (p. 200). These factors most likely contribute to fewer minority and families of lower socioeconomic status taking part in school choice programs.

Geography and choice. In addition to the distance and the logistical issues involved, geography affects the participation of parents, especially minority parents, in school choice in other ways. Research has found that poor and minority families have a stronger connection to their communities, which has directly resulted in a stronger connection to their community schools. Bell (2007) states, "Understanding geography as a special phenomenon principally concerned with mileage and commute times ignores however, some of the important features of geography, in particular the meanings people assign to space and its associated features" (p. 378). Walsh (2012) supports the concept that poor and minority parents have a greater connection to their communities when he states, "Although many minority parents live in neighborhoods suburban parents might view as substandard and dangerous, many parents feel at home in these neighborhoods because they are familiar with the community" (p. 10). It is this connection to their neighborhoods that drives low-income and minority families to choose their neighborhood schools more often than their counterparts. It is important to note that while these parents have chosen not to move their children from their neighborhood schools, they have still participated in choice work. Their choice set was very narrow early in the process due to the strong connection to their community.

School marketing. With the growth in popularity of charter schools and voucher programs, many school districts have implemented marketing strategies to promote their schools to potential parents. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, the school system spends a great deal of money to market its schools. According to Samuels (2012), "The district focuses on direct mailings, promotional efforts on public television stations during children's shows, and social media. In all, it spends $100,000 a year on advertising and marketing" (para. 14). In the Frasor public school district, also in Michigan, the school system operates a $130,000 ad campaign with Pandora radio (Meyers, 2014). Competition between the various options is fierce, and each student enrollment equates to dollars. It is understandable why these school systems would spend such large amounts to market themselves to parents. It is also a bit saddening when we consider the amount of funds that are being spent and not going to directly benefit teachers and students.

Segregation Concerns in School Choice

A key piece of data missing from Bast and Walberg's work was a look at exactly *who* is deciding to participate in school choice. Fortunately, there has been a lot of work done by others in this area. Many times over, throughout a span of several years, it has been found that White middle-class educated families predominantly participate in school choice opportunities. This brings up many equity issues for educators to consider as well as concerns regarding the segregation of schools.

Bosetti's (2004) work in Alberta, Canada found the above to be true. In the conclusion of her research on parents who choose magnet, charter, or private schools, she says, "Parents of low socioeconomic status are underrepresented in this study . . . Choice

schemes need to target these families of low socioeconomic status and provide them the support necessary to exercise choice" (p. 402). Goldring and Hausman's (1999) findings in St. Louis support these findings. In their research, they found that, "White parents are much more likely to choose magnet schools than other types of schools . . . In contrast, minority parents of students who attend schools in the St. Louis City Public Schools system are most likely to be non-choosers" (p. 480).

In North Carolina, the data is similar to what has been observed in other areas of the country. However, that wasn't always the case. Ladd et al. (2015), in their research on North Carolina charter schools state,

> In the early years, black students were substantially overrepresented and white students were underrepresented in the charter schools relative to traditional public school enrollments . . . Over time, however, that pattern has changed. The white share of charter school students increased from 58.6 percent to 62.2 percent over the full period, while their share of traditional public school students declined, from 64.1 percent to 53.0 percent. Thus, by 2012, white students were significantly overrepresented in the charter school sector. (p. 7)

Because it has been found many times that most choosers are White middle-class families, it should come as no surprise that there have been issues regarding the re-segregation of schools. Schneider and Buckley (2002) found through survey data that "Parents of all races and social classes say they prefer schools with good teachers and high test scores. And very few admit to being concerned by the racial or class composition of the student body" (p. 136). However, they go on to add, "These stated preferences are not congruent with observed parental behavior, where researchers have found significant effects of race and class" (p. 136). Put in other terms, parental actions

speak louder than their words on a survey. The remainder of this literature review will focus on how proximity and policy have led to more segregated schools, as well as a movement among parents to counteract segregation through the choice process.

Proximity. I have previously discussed how geography impacts school choice decisions, both in how it can contribute to a sense of limited options as well as how a strong tie to a community can lead minority families to choose their neighborhood schools. Beyond the connection to the community, the convenience of the neighborhood school plays an important part in many parents' decision. Jacobs (2011) states, "Proximity, as a parental preference, exists regardless of race, economic status, or linguistic proficiency" (p. 467). There is a strong desire for all parents to choose the neighborhood school out of convenience. Keeping students nearby makes it easy for parents to pick them up for medical appointments or if an emergency were to arise. The school closest in proximity may not be identified as the "best" school, but many parents will still choose it for the convenience factor.

Given this information, it is easy to see how proximity can lead to segregation. In Jacobs's (2011) research on Washington DC's charter school system, he found that "de facto housing patterns replicate themselves in neighborhood charter schools . . . an average Black student attends a school that is 92.22% Black" (p. 475). If a choice option is placed in a segregated neighborhood, it is nearly a guarantee the school's enrollment will mirror that segregation.

Policy. In many cases, school choice policies, which were created to decrease segregation in schools, have had the opposite effect. Olson Beal and Hendry (2012)

found that in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, parents were required to pick up magnet applications from the central office and hand deliver them to their first choice of school. The school system would not mail the application home, and parents could not mail the application back. They stated, "This policy privileges middle-class professionals and marginalizes parents with inflexible jobs or lack of transportation" (p. 532). This policy typically privileges White middle-class families while placing limits on the poor and minorities.

In Cincinnati, Fairview-Clifton Elementary School is one of the most coveted magnet schools in the public school system. In fact, it is so competitive to enroll in the school's limited available spots, parents actually camp out in line for several days in order to grab one of these spots. Sychay (2015) states, "I slept outside for 16 days to enroll my son in Fairview-Clifton Elementary School" (p. 1). He goes on to say that parents are put in line based on the order they arrive at the school. Over the years, the line has begun to form earlier and earlier. There are also rules put in place in order to keep your place in line. He states,

> The rules dictate what you have to do in order to keep your place in line. For example, we had two daily roll calls. Missing a roll call was a strike. Three strikes, and you're back to the end of the Line. (p. 4)

The rules put in place are as follows:

1. Everyone must be present from 10:00 p.m. until 5:00 a.m.
2. Roll call every day at 10:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. Miss 3 roll calls and you will be removed from the list.
3. 5 total hours of break per day.

4. You must sign in and out, drop tag in box when gone. Any time over will be deducted from the following day, not to exceed 1 hour.
5. Tents go up at 4:15 p.m. They must be taken down by 6:30 a.m.
6. No parking in the school drive or parking lot until after dusk.
7. All cars moved from school drive by 6:30 a.m.
8. Sleeping in cars, on property, and not running is permitted. (p. 5)

It is clear to see that this extreme situation in Cincinnati clearly favors parents that are more privileged than others. With only five hours per day away from the line, it would be a challenge for parents with less flexible jobs to arrange to be in the line and work to provide for their families. Sychay (2015) states, "With only 5 hours per day, I couldn't both work in the mornings and see my family at night" (p. 9).

While some choice policies do not specifically mention race in their wording, others clearly do so. Baton Rouge has a policy limiting the number of Black students that can be accepted at a magnet school to 55% of the school's population. However, Baton Rouge, at the time of the study, had a population that was nearly 70% Black. According to Olson Beal and Hendry (2012):

> Because there are more blacks in the public school system, they get shut out of better programs. There are only a certain number of slots in the magnet schools, so there's more competition among the blacks for those slots. Whites have an easier chance of getting in, which is unfair to black people. (p. 533)

One parent shared her story in dealing with this policy:

> On the application, I put that Thomas was black because I didn't have Creole to choose. It's just black and nonblack. He was denied, so I called the school and said: "Why can't he be in the program?" and they said: "We've reached our quota for black students." And I said: "Well, his father is white. Can I put white?" And they said: "Sure." So I put white and he was accepted. (p. 534)

We can see from the quote above how various choice policies can force parents to manipulate the system in their favor. While this parent was able to make the necessary corrections, many minority families do not have that luxury.

Roda and Wells (2013) researched the Gifted and Talented magnet programs in New York City. They found, "These G&T programs were created primarily as mechanisms to keep white, more advantaged families in the public schools by providing alternatives to neighborhood schools enrolling large numbers of low-income black and/or Latino students" (p. 273). Admission to these programs requires an application. The parents must also provide teacher recommendations from their pre-k teacher and take an admissions test to determine if they would qualify. It is no surprise these schools are segregated. These are just a few examples of how policies, whether intentional or unintentional, are leading to segregated choice options.

Demanding diversity. In some cases, White families are demanding changes to these policies that create segregated schools. Roda and Wells (2013) reported, "One fourth of parents who were offered a G & T seat turned it down" (p. 288). Many of them turned these seats down due to a lack of student diversity. Cucchiara and Horvat (2014) found many White parents are forgoing other choice options and keeping their children in their traditional public schools out of a "deep and abiding belief in the importance and power of public education" (p. 496). Many of these parents associated public schools with their values of living in a democratic society. One parent stated, "I feel like I want to be part of a neighborhood and a society which lives by the values it seems to promote"

(p. 498). As more parents demand these changes, choice policies will need to be re-written in order to truly promote a diverse student body.

The process parents undertake in order to choose the best educational option for their children is not as neat and simple as Rational Choice Theory makes it out to be. It is a very personal decision complicated by a number of varying factors. I am interested in how parents weigh these factors to make a school choice decision. I am interested in how parents in rural areas navigate these factors in order to choose from the ever-increasing number of school options now available to them. I am also interested in the efforts the leaders of these choice options take to make their school a viable option for these parents. The following research questions will guide this study:

1. What factors influence rural parents when they make school choice decisions?
2. What do parents do to create their choice set?
3. What do school officials in rural public, magnet, charter, and private schools do to inform the choices of parents?
4. How could the context be shaped to make it more informative for parents?

The school choice research that I could find has been conducted in large urban areas. In order to gain a complete picture of the school choice process, research had to be conducted in rural communities. To contribute to this work, I used research theories that attempt to analyze how parents make these decisions.

Theoretical Framework

I utilized Decision Theory as the framework for my study. Modern decision theory developed in the mid-20th century, and is used by a number of researchers, such

as economists, psychologists, political scientists, and statisticians. Hansson (1994) describes decision theory in the following way:

> It focuses on only some aspects of human activity. In particular, it focuses on how we use our freedom. In the situations treated by decision theorists, there are options to choose between, and we choose in a non-random way. Our choices, in these situations, are goal-directed activities. Hence, decision theory is concerned with goal-directed behavior in the presence of options. (p. 6)

Specifically, I focused on descriptive decision theory. According to Hansson (1994), "A descriptive theory is a theory about how decisions are actually made" (p. 6). The purpose of this study is to describe each parent's goal-directed behavior in the presence of various school options as well as how schools attempt to shape them.

A tool commonly used in decision theory is a decision tree, which is a visual representation of a particular decision problem. According to the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (n.d.) website, there are four components of a decision tree: acts, events, outcomes, and payoffs (para. 1). I adapted this tool to develop a concept map representing my conceptual framework (see Figure 2).

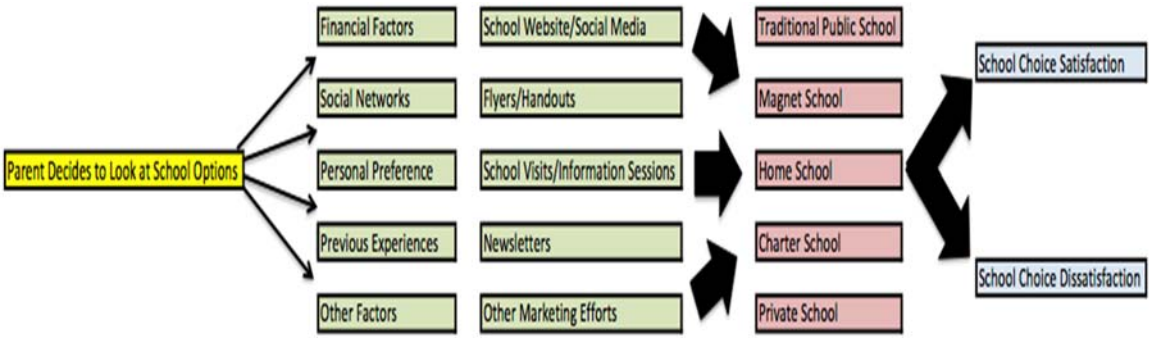

Figure 2. Decision Tree.

In the concept map shown in Figure 2, the act is the parental decision to consider different school options. In the decision tree model, events are "occurrences taking place outside the control of the agent" (para. 1). In this model, the events are the factors and experiences affecting the decision-making process, including the schools' efforts to shape the decision. This is where most of my efforts were directed. I am very interested in the work schools do to make themselves appealing to parents, while at the same time learning about how these efforts inform potential parents. Outcomes are the results of the decision. In this model, the results are the choice of a particular type of school. Finally, payoffs are "the values the decision maker is placing on the occurrences" (para. 1). In this case, the payoff is the participation in the school choice process. Payoffs can be positive or negative, which in this study would be the satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the selection of school.

One criticism of decision theory I have, based on a review of the literature, is that parents are not always free to make the decision they truly want to make. Economic, informational, experiential, a sense of limited choices, and geographic factors constrain a parent's ability to make a truly free choice. Knowing this, decision theory was still the best fit for this study. It was important for me to identify how constrained each parent's decision was and how they navigated these constraints in order to make a school choice decision.

Summary and Overview

Chapter II began with an introduction of the concept of school choice in North Carolina from a historical perspective. A more in depth review of charter schools,

magnet schools, and the state's new voucher program was conducted. While all these options are championed as providing more educational freedom to parents, there are concerns as to how much freedom really exists for all families, especially the poor, minorities, and homosexuals.

After exploring the various options available to North Carolina families, this chapter analyzed the school choice process. Early theories on how parents applied market strategies were described, as well the counter claims made by other researchers. It was determined that the school choice process was a very personal one, shaped by economic factors, social networks, previous experiences, a sense of limited options, and geography. Additionally, schools spend a great deal of resources marketing themselves to these parents in an effort for them to include their school in their choice set. The chapter ends by further looking at segregation concerns within various choice options.

The following chapter will describe the methodology I used to conduct this study. Methods used for data collection and analysis will be described. The setting and criteria for selecting participants will be explained.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to determine what factors influenced rural parents who have taken part in the school choice process. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What factors influence rural parents when they make school choice decisions?
2. What do parents do to create their choice set?
3. What do school officials in rural public, magnet, charter, and private schools do to inform the choices of parents?
4. How could the context be shaped to make it more informative and inclusive for parents?

This study used qualitative research approaches to explore these questions.

Tenets of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research focuses on human behavior. According to Lichtman (2013) it is "a way of knowing in which a researcher gathers, organizes, and interprets information obtained using his or her eyes as filters. It often involves interviews and/or observations of humans in natural, online, or social settings" (p. 7). Qualitative methods allow the researcher to gain additional information to describe with rich detail what happens in natural settings and emphasizes multiple realities of the same phenomena (Creswell, 2007). Woods (2006) adds, "The qualitative researcher seeks to discover the

meanings that participants attach to their behavior, how they interpret situations, and what their perspectives are on particular issues" (para. 1).

One crucial component of qualitative research is that the study takes place in the natural setting of the participants. This allows the participant to be comfortable in an interview setting, which will lead to high-quality responses. Additionally, the natural setting will allow the researcher to collect other forms of data, such as notes about the participant's environment, pictures, etc. (Lichtman, 2013, p. 20). This allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the participants. This statement is supported by Woods (2006) when he states, "Qualitative researchers are concerned with life as it is lived in real situations" (para. 1).

Patton (2002) proposes 12 major characteristics of qualitative research. He divides these 12 characteristics into three groups of strategies pertaining to Design, Research and Data Collection, and Analysis.

Design Strategies

1. Naturalistic inquiry—Studying real-world situations as they unfold naturally; non-manipulative and non-controlling; openness to whatever emerges.
2. Emergent design flexibility—Openness to adapting inquiry as understanding deepens and/or situations change.
3. Purposeful sampling—Cases for study (e.g., people, organizations, communities, cultures, events, critical incidences) are selected because they are "information rich" and illuminative.

Research and Data Collection Strategies

4. Qualitative data—Observations that yield detailed, thick description; inquiry in depth; interviews that capture direct quotations about people's personal perspectives and experiences; case studies; careful document review.
5. Personal experience and engagement—The researcher has direct contact with and gets close to the people, situation, and phenomenon under study; the researcher's personal experiences and insights are an important part of the inquiry and critical to understanding the phenomenon.

6. Empathic neutrality and mindfulness—An empathic stance in interviewing seeks vicarious understanding without judgment (neutrality) by showing openness, sensitivity, respect, awareness, and responsiveness; in observation it means being fully present (mindfulness).
7. Dynamic systems—Attention to process; assumes change as ongoing whether focus is on an individual, an organization, a community, or an entire culture; therefore, mindful of and attentive to system and situation dynamics.

Analysis Strategies

8. Unique case orientation—Assumes that each case is special and unique; the first level of analysis is being true to, respecting, and capturing the details of the individual cases being studied.
9. Inductive analysis and creative synthesis—Immersion in the details and specifics of the data to discover important patterns, themes, and interrelationships.
10. Holistic perspective—The whole phenomenon under study is understood as a complex system that is more than the sum of its parts.
11. Context sensitivity—Places findings in a social, historical, and temporal context.
12. Voice, perspective, and reflexivity—The qualitative analyst owns and is reflective about her or his own voice and perspective; a credible voice conveys authenticity and trustworthiness. (pp. 40-41)

Research Design

This study was designed to determine what factors influence rural parents' school choice decisions and what actions school and school system leaders take to make sure their particular option is included in a parent's choice set. To accomplish this, a basic qualitative study was used. Merriam (2009) states, "Researchers conducting a basic qualitative study would be interested in (1) how people interpret their experience, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experience" (p. 23). For the purposes of this study, I looked specifically at how a parent's experiences led to making a school choice decision, what process they take to construct their choice set, and the meaning behind the choice that was made. In these types of studies, data is typically collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. I focused on

interviews and document analysis. Observation would not be appropriate in this study, as I was exploring events that have already taken place.

The first component of this study focused on the parents. These parents have made the conscious decision to explore various school options available to them. Through an in-depth interview process, I gained insight into why parents want different educational choices, how they went about including or excluding a particular school from their choice set, and their overall experiences with the school choice process. Merriam (2009) said the purpose of qualitative research is to determine "how people make sense of their lives and their worlds" (p. 24). Through this study, I learned how parents make sense of the school choice process.

A second component of this study focused on school and school system leaders. With the increased competition for students, leaders have started implementing marketing strategies to entice parents to select their school. It was important to gain the perspectives of all the key leaders in a school or school system in order to learn how their efforts help inform a parent's decision. In-depth interviews were conducted with central office personnel responsible for school choice options, as well as principals of public, magnet, charter, and private schools. Through these interviews, I learned how these leaders view the world of school choice as well as how they work to shape the realities of their potential parents.

The final component of this research was document analysis. Lichtman (2013) states that these documents "provide a window into the human mind" (p. 232). I collected any available print documents, such as recruiting materials, flyers, etc. I also

collected electronic resources, such as evidence from school websites and any existing social media accounts. An analysis of the documents accompanied by insights gained in the interviews helped determine what impact these documents have on the parents' decision.

Perspectives gained from both parents and school administrators, as well as an analysis of various documents was applied to the theoretical framework described in Chapter 2. In the decision tree concept map I have created, the primary focus was placed on the events that shaped the school choice decision. These events included the parent's experiences that shaped their choice set, as well as the efforts of school and school system leaders make to influence their decision. All of this helped me gain a more complete picture of how rural parents navigate the school choice process.

Key Term

One key term important to define for this study is ***rural***. Different people may define rural in various ways. However, the U.S. Census Bureau (2010) has a clear definition that will be used for this study. It first defines urban areas as "areas with 50,000 people or more" (para. 2). It goes on to describe rural areas as "all population, housing and territory not associated with an urban area" (para. 3). So for the purposes of this study, rural areas were areas with less than 50,000 people. The county school district selected for this study does not have an urban area within its borders.

Setting

The setting for this study was Davis County located in central North Carolina. In an effort to protect the anonymity of all participants, all formal names in this study,

including the names of the county, schools, and the participants themselves will be replaced with pseudonyms. This county was chosen because it is home to charter schools and private schools. Additionally, the public school system offers different forms of school choice programs, including various magnet programs and an Early College High School. Davis County borders counties that are also considered rural. The median household income in Davis County is $34,987. The county provides a location that is geographically ideal for me as the researcher, and it provided me a diverse group of participants with many different perspectives for my study.

The public school system in Davis County is home to ten elementary schools, two middle schools, and four high schools (including one Early College High School). The district also has different academies that are separate choices located on a traditional school campus. These academies do not have their own school number, so they are not considered a stand-alone school. Total enrollment for the district is approximately 6,500 students. There are two charter schools in this county as well, with a combined enrollment of approximately 1,100 students. The two charter schools vary dramatically in their demographics. Stevens Charter School, which participated in this study, is approximately 95% students of color. The other charter school in this county, which did not participate in the study, has a self-reported demographic makeup that is 85% Caucasian. There are also two private schools located in Davis County. One has a religious affiliation and one does not. The combined enrollment for these two schools is approximately 540 students.

The participants determined the setting for the individual interviews. In an effort to create an environment that led to high quality responses, parent participants were encouraged to select their ideal location for the interviews. I reminded the parents that our dialogue is important, so the time of day the interview took place was another key factor they considered when scheduling the interview. As a result, most of the parents were interviewed at their child's school, while a few opted for me to meet them at their home or office during their lunch break. School leaders also selected the setting for their interviews. I visited most of them in their respective offices at a time that was convenient for them, whether it was before, during, or after business hours. Regardless of the time, I made myself available to them when their schedule allowed.

Participants

The first source of participants for this study was parents from Davis County who have participated in the school choice process. Eligible participants were parents who looked at a school option outside of their assigned traditional public school and then made a final decision on their children's placement. They all ultimately decided the best option for their children was a traditional public school, charter school, magnet school, private school, or home school. It is important to reiterate that some of the parent participants decided that a traditional public school was the best option for their children. It was crucial for this study to find out what made them want to look at other choices and what made them decide that the school their children already attended was the best option for them. A second source of participants was the various school and school system

leaders who work to help shape these parents' decisions. This included key central office personnel responsible for school choice programs, and school principals.

I interviewed ten parents from Davis County. Two were traditional public school parents, two were charter school parents, two were magnet school parents, two were private school parents, and two were home school parents. Of the ten parents who participated in this study, nine of them originally had placed their children in the traditional public school setting before beginning the school choice process. Additionally, I interviewed one central office administrator responsible for the various magnet programs, one charter school principal, one private school principal, one magnet school principal, and one traditional public school principal for a total of five school leaders. A total of fifteen participants were interviewed for this study. I had also planned to include a virtual charter school principal and two Davis County parents who had enrolled their children in that virtual charter school, which would have brought my total number of participants to eighteen. I reached out to the virtual charter school whose office was closest to me geographically, but I was not granted access. Upon calling the school's home office in North Carolina, my information was forwarded to the school's corporate office in another state. I had a dialogue with an official in the corporate office, but I was never given access to the principal or any of their parents. Therefore, a total of fifteen participants, ten parents and five administrators, were interviewed for this study. The perspective of a diverse group of participants was crucial to this study, so I interviewed parents from different racial groups as represented by their county

demographics. For the purposes of this study, I looked at the perspectives of African-American, Latino, and White parents.

Principals were selected using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is the selection of individuals and sites that can provide different perspectives and understandings of the research problem and the study's phenomenon (Patton, 1990). These principals were selected to participate based on my knowledge of their current job placement, their understanding of school choice, and/or their efforts to promote their schools as an option to parents.

Parent participants were selected with the assistance of school principals. I gave each principal my contact information and the general purpose of the study. They in turn shared my information with potential participants and invited them to contact me if they would be interested in participating in the research. For the home school parents, I shared my contact information with several people who knew parents who home schooled their children and they in turn invited them to contact me if they wished to participate in the study. I did not personally know the parent participants.

Data Collection

Data was collected from all participants through a semi-structured interview process. This type of interview, according to Lichtman (2013), allows the interviewer to "vary the questions as the situation demands" (p. 191). I also asked follow-up questions based on the participants' answers to the interview guides in an effort to delve deeper into the discussion. Each parent participant was initially interviewed on average for forty-five minutes in order to discuss the various factors that impacted their choice of school. Each

school leader was also initially interviewed for approximately forty-five minutes in an effort to understand how their efforts impact school choice decisions. I also conducted follow-up research with participants once the data had been coded via email. In this step of the data collection process, I asked participants to elaborate on their previous responses, which gave me a more complete understanding of each of their experiences with school choice. These follow-up questions provided rich data that added to my study. I was able to further explore the financial hardships of the private school in this study, which will be discussed later in Chapter V. I also gained more insight into the concept of student voice in the school choice process, which will be discussed in Chapter IV. The attached interview guides (see Appendices A and B) were used to facilitate the discussion. All interviews were recorded, and I had the interviews transcribed. Each interview was uploaded into NVivo data analysis software.

A secondary source of information for this study was the collection of documents relevant to the research. These consisted of any recruitment information (fliers, brochures, school website/social media material, etc.) that was available. This proved to be a very rich source of data, as I was able to look at each school's digital media and understand how these websites, social media platforms, and other documents may influence a parent's school choice decision. The strengths of this source of data lie with the fact that the documents already exist in the situation and that they are used to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources (Yin, 2009). An analysis of these documents compared to participant answers shed some light on how these school choice

decisions were made. Document analysis is typically associated with a basic qualitative study.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were transcribed, I began analyzing the data by uploading the transcriptions into the NVivo analysis software. I generated codes and looked for recurring themes. A priori codes were created from the key components of my literature review. Other codes were generated during the transcription process. As I read my transcripts, several themes were echoed throughout the participants' interviews, so codes were created from these occurrences. Examples from this research study that will be discussed in later chapters were the parents' use of student voice in creating their choice set, and the administrator participants feelings on competition, and a need to level the playing field.

After the coding process was complete, I looked for any outliers in the data. This is typically a response that was given by one or two of the participants. When this occurred, I asked follow up questions to the other participants to see if they would give the same response via email. If participants gave the same answers as the outliers it reinforced the answers given by these few people. If they did not, then these experiences would appear to be isolated to these few participants. This presented an opportunity to explore these situations deeper to gain a full understanding of their experience and how it shaped their decision. This form of data collection proved to be very valuable to this study, as specific findings were revealed as a result of this process.

I also looked for any silences in the data, or responses I would expect hear that I do not for one reason or another. An example of a response I would expect to hear is that many parents have opted out of the traditional public school for a private or charter school based on a poor experience. If these silences occurred, I asked more questions in an effort to address it.

As previously stated, document analysis was included in this study. Once the recruitment materials, website and social media posts, etc. were collected, I looked for anything that may stand out in these materials. It was crucial to look for clues within the documents that help explain the decisions that parents make, as well as to judge the impact of the various schools' efforts to shape that decision. Also, it was interesting to see if any of the materials were designed to purposefully encourage a certain type of student, whether it be a certain race, academic ability, socioeconomic class, etc., to apply to and enroll in their school. This step in the data collection and analysis process also proved valuable to this study, as information obtained from these resources provided some insights into how parents are making school choice decisions.

Once I had collected all of my data and coded my interviews, I triangulated my parent interviews, administrator interviews, and the document analysis to gain a complete picture of the school choice process in Davis County. I looked to see if the parent and administrator data supported one another. I reflected on the themes generated during the coding process as I look at the electronic resources to see if the websites, social media posts, and other documents supported the claims made by the participants. This helped me develop a sense of the school choice environment in Davis County.

Subjectivity and Positionality

As the researcher, it is important I acknowledge the biases I brought into this study. These revolve around my role as a parent and a professional educator in the public school system.

As a parent, it is my hope that other parents will choose schools for their children based on what they believe to be the best educational option for them. I also understand that some parents may not be able to place their children in what they consider the best option due to various factors, including tuition costs, transportation issues, etc. Ultimately, I hope that parents who want options have a number of acceptable ones available to them, and make their final decisions based on what they feel is the best educational option for their children.

However, my former position as Director of School Choice Programs in another rural school system leads me to believe that some parents make decisions not based on what the new choice has to offer, but rather on a dislike of the previous school/school system. Also, the data shows that charter schools tend to be more segregated, so issues of race and class privilege may factor into some parents' decisions.

I acknowledge I carried biases that favored the public school system into this study. Given this, I thought it was very important that I focus on reflexivity throughout the interview process. Lichtman (2013), states, "Reflexivity is a process of self-examination primarily informed by the thoughts and actions of the researcher" (p. 164). She goes on to say, "By acknowledging the role of the self in qualitative research, the researchers are able to sort through biases and think about how they affect various aspects

of the research, especially the interpretation of meanings" (p. 165). In order to maintain reflexivity throughout the study, I implemented journaling techniques. Immediately after each interview with a participant, I would write in my journal my initial thoughts. I tried to capture my first impression of each interview, focusing on the "big takeaways" from the meeting. This technique proved to be extremely valuable, as I was able to create a much bigger picture of the school choice process for myself, and I found I was more open to learn new things about school choice I had never considered.

Trustworthiness

Given my position in my school system, as well as my status as a white, middle-class, married male whose daughter attends public school, I took several actions in order to make sure my position did not impact my data collection. First, I arranged interviews in locations that were most comfortable for the participants. To maintain confidentiality, I assured participants they would remain anonymous and their identities protected. Additionally, I did not identify the names of the schools or the county in which they are located in the final report. Establishing a rapport with the participants is crucial. I dressed in a more casual fashion as to not project the official capacity that comes with my position of employment. I also attempted to connect with the parents through my role as a parent myself. My daughter chose to transfer to a magnet school during her elementary education experience. Having a common bond of participating in the school choice process with the participants should help put them at ease and encourage them to be more open to my questions.

To maintain trustworthiness during this process, I was transparent and honest throughout the study. By fully explaining to parents the purpose of this study is to determine why parents in rural settings choose different school options, and that there is very little existing research on the subject, they were able to determine if they would like to participate. Further explaining the ultimate goal of the study is to provide recommendations on how rural counties can improve educational options for all children promoted trustworthiness and participation as well.

I also conducted a member check with each of the participants of this study. Participants were provided a copy of their interview transcript via email in order to review it for accuracy. During this activity, I used the opportunity to ask follow up questions to each participant. These questions were created during the transcription process. Collecting this information during the member check process allowed me to build stronger themes amongst the data.

Benefits and Risks

This study will benefit schools and school systems in rural counties across North Carolina, and may have implications for rural counties across the country. By developing a strong understanding from a diverse group of participants the processes they go through in choosing a school, the entire educational system can be strengthened. Local school board policies could be rewritten. New programs could be provided to ensure school options match the desires of its population. Additionally, learning how schools and school systems work to shape those decisions can reveal a lot of information about how which strategies are influencing which parents. It could be helpful to know where the

gaps exist in terms of making school choice more inclusive for parents of different races and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Traditional public schools that do not offer magnet options will also benefit from the results of this study. One of the groups in this study consists of parents who decided the traditional public school was the best option for their children. Learning what specific attributes these parents like, and do not like, about their schools will show them areas of strengths and weaknesses. This will allow them to highlight their strongpoints and develop plans to improve the perceived areas of improvement. While my main focus is the public school system, charter and private schools could use this research as well to make sure their offerings align with the demand of their parents.

Potential risks associated with this study are focused on the parent participants themselves. Some parents, especially parents of children in charter schools and private schools, may not feel as open speaking to me about their decision to leave the public school system. This may be especially true for parents that are aware of my occupation. They may feel that I am in some way looking for ways to try to convince them to return to the public school system they left. This is why building a strong sense of trustworthiness with every participant is critical for me.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that all of the parent participants had some level of means that allowed them to look at other school options. While not all parents could afford the private school tuition, they all had resources available to look at some options and were willing to make or provide special arrangements regarding travel and other

sacrifices in order to make the school of their choice work for their children. Parents who did not look at any other options, or could not afford to look at other options, were not included in this study.

A second limitation of this study lies in the amount of research that has focused on school choice in rural areas. Very little research of this type currently exists, and this study focuses on one county in central North Carolina. However, with the continued expansion of school choice in rural counties, it is my hope that this study will provide a guide for future research.

Summary of Data Collection and Data Analysis Processes

Data collection for this study was conducted in three stages. The first stage was the participant interviews. Each participant was initially interviewed for approximately forty-five minutes following a semi-structured process. After reviewing the interview transcriptions, I emailed each participant a copy of their transcript for member checking purposes. In the second stage of data collection, I asked follow up questions via these emails to gain a deeper understanding of the answers they provided. This electronic question and answer session provided valuable insight and helped me understand the environment of school choice in Davis County clearer. The final stage of data collection occurred via document analysis. I looked at each school's website, social media accounts, and any print materials (fliers, applications, etc.) that were available. This proved to be extremely valuable as I was able to gain an understanding as to why some parents chose, or did not choose, a particular school.

Data analysis occurred after the transcriptions were uploaded into the NVivo software. Transcriptions were coded and themes were discovered. Outliers and silences in the data were looked for, which led to the follow up emails with the participants. I used journaling as a reflection. Immediately after each interview with a participant, I would write in my journal my initial thoughts. I tried to capture my first impression of each interview. The results of these collection and analysis processes can be found in Chapters IV and V.

CHAPTER IV

PARENT PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL CHOICE

Chapter IV begins with a brief description of the various school sites in Davis County and the people who chose to participate in this study. As a reminder, all formal names, including the names of the county, schools, and participants have been replaced with pseudonyms. After these introductions, I will describe the organizing concepts that appeared in the parent interview data. They are:

1. Previous experiences with school and their influence on the school choice decision.
2. Parents' choice work.
3. Parents' construction of their choice set.

Davis County Introduction

Davis County Schools is the public school system located within Davis County. It is home to ten elementary schools, two middle schools, and four high schools, one of which is Davis Early College High School. The district has different academies that are separate choices located on a traditional school campus. These academies do not have their own school number, so they are not considered stand-alone schools. Total enrollment for the district is approximately 6,500 students. Teresa serves as the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction for the school system, and oversees the various magnet programs. Davis High School served as the traditional public school for

this study. It is home to 847 students. The school is 69% African American and 17% Caucasian. The remaining 14% of the population is comprised of Latinos, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders. One hundred percent of the students at the school receive free and reduced lunch. Alex serves as the school's principal. He has been in this role for two years, but has served in several leadership roles throughout Davis County Schools for the past 17 years. Bridget is a Caucasian mother to a daughter who recently graduated from the school. Linda is an African American mother of three. She has a 16 year-old daughter who currently attends Davis High School.

Davis Early College served as the magnet school location for this study. The school enrollment is approximately 232 students in grades 9-13. According to principal Matthew, "The school is 60-65% Black, 20-25% White, and 10-15% Hispanic." Matthew has also been with the district for a number of years and founded the school in 2008. Stephanie is a Latino mother of two children at the school. David is a Caucasian father of four children. One son is a recent graduate of the Early College, and another son is in the ninth grade at the school.

Jones Academy is one of two private schools located in Davis County. The school serves approximately 300 students in grades K-12. Yearly tuition, according to the school's website, ranges from $5,400 in the younger grades to $9,162 for grades 7-12. It is not affiliated with any religion or church. Given the cost of attendance and the financial hardships impacting the area, the school is not as racially diverse at the other schools previously mentioned. According to headmaster Phillip:

> Socioeconomics is a difficult one, and it does go into the racial component as well. Socioeconomics is the number one negative factor for us. We're not free. We are expensive. We do offer financial aid if you qualify, there's an application process and it is a lengthy application process. You truly have to qualify, but we do not offer anything more than a 50% tuition financial aid packet, which means you have to be able to pay at least half of the tuition, so socioeconomics is difficult, and given the racial breakdown of Davis County (and) surrounding counties, that inherently becomes more difficult when you have a minority population that is also impacted socioeconomically.

Phillip has been the headmaster of the school for over ten years, after beginning his 22-year career in public education in Massachusetts. Dawn is a Caucasian mother to a son currently enrolled at the school. Debra is a Caucasian mother of two children. Her son is a recent graduate of the school and her daughter is currently enrolled there.

Stevens Charter School is one of two charter schools located in Davis County. The school currently serves 100 students each in grades 4-10. Next year, the school will add another 100 students in both kindergarten and 11th grade. Eventually, the school will expand to cover grades K-12 and house approximately 1,300 students. The school is, according to Executive Director and founder Robert, "about 86% low income and 95% students of color." Another interesting thing about Stevens, according to Robert, is "Unlike other charter schools we offer food services, breakfast, lunch, and a snack, and we offer transportation service as well." The school traditionally does very well on standardized test scores, and has been visited by a number of local and state education leaders. Stacy is an African-American mother of a daughter who attends Stevens, and a son who attends another nearby charter school. Her son is in one grade higher than what Stevens offers; otherwise he would attend the school too. Tiffany is a Caucasian mother to a biracial son who is in the middle school program at Stevens.

Ann and Jessica are the two home school parents who elected to participate in this study. Ann is a Caucasian mother of three children, who range from eighth grade to recent high school graduate. She removed all three of her children from public school around the time they were all in middle school to early high school. Jessica is a Caucasian mother to two children. Her daughter went to public school for just a few years before she pulled her out for homeschool. She also has a younger son who is going to be entering kindergarten during the 2016-2017 school year.

Table 2

Parent Participants and School Chosen

Participant	Race	Gender	School Chosen
Bridget	Caucasian	Female	Davis High
Linda	African-American	Female	Davis High
David	Caucasian	Male	Davis Early College
Stephanie	Latino	Female	Davis Early College
Dawn	Caucasian	Female	Jones Academy
Debra	Caucasian	Female	Jones Academy
Stacy	African-American	Female	Stevens Charter
Tiffany	Caucasian	Female	Stevens Charter
Ann	Caucasian	Female	Home School
Jessica	Caucasian	Female	Home School

Previous Experiences

Before I can venture into how parents went about their choice work or how they developed their choice set, I feel it is important to share these parents' previous

experiences of their children with schooling. After all, it was these experiences that motivated these parents to start the school choice process. Nine of these ten parent participants started their children's educational journey in a traditional public school, and only two of those parents kept their children in the traditional setting into high school. The two parents that did keep their children in the traditional setting shared some remorse about leaving their children there and suggested they would probably have made a different decision if they could go back and do it again. Therefore, I feel it is necessary to understand what motivates a parent into starting the school choice process before looking at the process itself. The parents' experiences can be placed into three categories: School Environment, Personnel Concerns, and Academic Issues.

School Environment

As I was looking at my interview data and focusing on responses regarding the school environment, I discovered that these environmental concerns could be divided into two areas, Class Size and Safety/Discipline Concerns. Both of these issues take on a number of forms as described below.

Class size. One of the main concerns for parents within the category of school environment is the actual physical size of the school and the number of students in the building and in each classroom. Many of the parents who opted to leave the traditional public school setting mentioned a major factor in their decision had to do with class size. David, talking about his decision not to send his son to Davis High School, stated, "I don't think he would have been as successful because just what I know from teachers that work there, the class sizes are bigger."

The issue of class size from the Davis County parents is not isolated to just the high school grade levels. Stephanie felt the middle schools were also too big, and that the middle school years were too important a time in a child's development to have this issue. In discussing the middle school her children would have attended, she stated:

> There were too many middle school kids there and I don't know how it is now, but I think that these kids in the middle school, you know, they go through the emotional changes, their body's changing, biological, they need more contact with adults that can structure their life and their guidance.

Stacy also saw class size as an issue at her daughter's elementary school. She said,

> Well, because you had so many students in a classroom with one teacher and at that time they was cutting the TAs out. I was visiting my daughter's school as well, sitting in in the classroom and, you know, just observing the teacher teaching and the students, you know, a lot of, I saw a lot of them wasn't catching on, you know, it was like going over their heads and so it was, the class size was just too big for one teacher.

Tiffany also felt like the class size her son dealt with at the elementary level has had a direct impact on his current academic struggles. She stated,

> Well, to be honest, looking back, you know, in Kindergarten my son struggled. And I just think they could have caught it then with his reading, but they didn't, and it just grew and continued, and I wish that it had been caught back then and he may not have the same struggles that he has today, but I just don't feel like that—I feel like that environment is not one where they truly care, their class sizes are much bigger, they don't have as much one-on-one with the kids.

You can see from Stacy and Tiffany's quotes that they saw first-hand the impact class size was having on student success. In fact, all of these parents felt that larger class

sizes would have a negative impact on their child's academic success. This was mainly due to a lack of personal attention staff members are able to give in larger settings.

Safety/discipline issues. Another way in which parents discussed the school environment has to do with the overall feeling that the school is safe. When talking about safety concerns, parents focused on the behaviors of the other students within the school setting as a major reason, sometimes the primary reason, why they opted to change their child's school placement. Debra has had many conversations with parents who, like herself, removed their children from public school and sent them to Jones Academy. She stated, "A lot of times it's the safety of being in the bathroom or being in the school, sometimes the academics is secondary." Ann, speaking on why she decided to homeschool her children, stated,

> It's because of all the things that are in the schools now, they weren't there when you and I were in school, the drugs and the kids having sex on the bus, which has happened in front of my children, happens in front of other people's children, the drugs in the schools, the smoking in the schools, the fighting, the bullying, it's almost always the same reason, almost always, it's just the environment.

She goes on to say:

> And now it's like people are raising their children to have no respect at all for any kind of authority, so, you know, what are the teachers going to do? Kids are fighting teachers, it's just, it's ridiculous, and I don't want my kids to think that's okay, and a lot of parents out there don't either.

From these quotes, it is clear that Ann made the decision to homeschool her children because she did not want to expose them to an environment that was not safe,

bordering on chaos. Linda affirmed that this chaotic environment is indeed in existence at Davis High School where her daughter attends. She stated,

> She just feel like it's chaotic, you know, she's a real student, really a studious student, so when she goes in she goes in to learn, she doesn't like the foolishness. She doesn't like having to stop in the middle of her lesson trying to learn what she's going to learn for a discipline problem.

When asked what were the critical aspects of schooling that had to be in place for their children, many parents mentioned the importance of a good environment that was safe and provided a more personalized approach for the students by keeping class sizes small. David stated, "I would want a school that has a very nurturing environment and one with smaller class sizes and where he could get some one-on-one attention if he needed it." Bridget stated, "I want a building that is well-maintained and safe." Debra echoed these sentiments when she said, "I think for me personally, a safe environment is the first priority and when it comes to trusting your child somewhere." The parents of Davis County were greatly impacted by the environment they knew existed in the traditional school setting. Their knowledge of the traditional setting swayed many of them to begin the school choice process.

Personnel Concerns

When discussing their previous experiences with the traditional school setting and what caused parents to look at other options, many parents brought up concerns with school personnel as a driving force in their school choice decision. A major concern for parents in this area was a high teacher turnover rate. Bridget told the following story

about her daughter having three different band teachers during her four years at Davis High School:

> When (she) was a freshman they had a band director that ran everything into the ground. She was horrible. She had no classroom management. Things got broken. Things did not get fixed. Kids left right and left and the program was horrible. She found out she was expecting, she had a horrible pregnancy, and she left, left them high and dry. They got another band director from a middle school, a female band director from a middle school who was better. She was a great middle school band director, but not a great high school band director. She stayed two, two and a half years; left to go home because she was away from home and she wanted to go back towards the coast.

David, speaking about his son's experiences in a new STEM middle school, stated, "Every year he was there they lost over half the teachers. And if it wasn't half the teachers at the end of the year, it was half the teachers didn't come back after the first semester." Debra described her son's experience during the elementary school years the following way, "The whole five years he was there, every year his teacher left for one reason or another. It was a very odd situation and they either had a baby, got married, moved, or was sick."

Like many rural North Carolina school districts, Davis County Schools struggles with teacher turnover. They struggle to offer competitive supplements that much larger area school districts can afford to pay. There are not as many amenities and activities for young teachers as can be found in these large counties. These factors, along with others, attribute to a self-reported teacher turnover rate for the 2015-2016 school year of 22%. The constant turnover, the number of substitute teachers in classrooms on a long-term

basis, made parents feel their children were not getting the instruction or leadership they needed. Linda shared the following story:

> Davis High has a very high turnover of teachers, so you know, like her drafting class, she didn't have a teacher half that semester. So I was like okay what do we—my child's in a class and we kind of have these substitute teachers coming in and you're going to give her an exam when she hadn't learned anything.

David said the following regarding the substitutes in his son's classes, "There were subs, it was—there were subs in the classroom for a whole semester, and the management of the school was not what as a parent I thought it should be."

Teacher behavior. While teacher turnover is a major factor in parents' descriptions of personnel concerns, the actual behavior of the staff members, particularly their actions towards the students, was also discussed. Tiffany, whose son went through kindergarten through third grade in Davis County Schools and struggled academically, felt like the staff was not willing to help her son. Eventually after a lot of pressing, her son received an IEP. She stated, "It's like they didn't want to help (him), so I had to advocate for him and get him tested and he has an IEP and they didn't want to do that." Once her son had the IEP, her challenges with the school were not over. She goes on to say:

> (My son) had been pulled out for small group at one point and the teacher asked him something to the effect of do you feel stupid? Because when other kids see kids being pulled out or whatever they think they're stupid and that's what they call them.

Tiffany went on to summarize her experience with her son's school and the IEP process the following way:

> I really feel bad for other families who may not be educated or have access to people who know how it's supposed to work to help them advocate for their kids, because I'm sure there are some that they pass through or they just don't help like they're supposed to.

Ann's sentiments about her experience with some of her children's teachers provide a perfect summary of this section. She said,

> I have met a lot of teachers that made me angry, that made me frustrated, that made me wonder why they were even hired in the first place to be in charge of children. I came across too many teachers like that. A lot of parents do.

Whether it is the constant turnover of teachers, or the behavior of some staff members, personnel issues played a major role in many of these parents' decision to start the school choice process. Problems with personnel also contribute to another key component of a parent's previous experience with the traditional public school system, academics.

Academic Issues

When parents discussed academic issues, their main concern centered on the quality of the programs being offered in Davis County. In particular, parents discussed concerns about offerings for academically gifted students. Additionally, there were concerns about the implementation and support of new programs, especially a new STEM middle school.

Offerings for academically gifted students. Parents talked about how limited their children were when it came to offerings for academically gifted students. While there are honors and AP courses available, many of the other enrichment activities were not available to Bridget's daughter. She stated,

> Davis County has provided some enrichment activities in the means of field trips, but those happen only in elementary school. She has been able to take every advanced placement course that is offered at her high school, but as far as pushing her and challenging her, those activities have not been there.

Dawn echoed Bridget's sentiments when discussing her decision to move her son to Jones Academy. As he went through elementary school and transitioned to middle school, she felt like there were fewer and fewer opportunities for him. She said, "There wasn't anything in the middle school, so I was a little concerned about his—the challenging him and so that's one, that was the biggest reason, the curriculum was the biggest reason why we moved him."

Linda does not feel like her daughter has been greatly supported during her time at Davis High, and her success in her AP classes has solely been achieved by her own efforts. When talking about her daughter's future, she said, "I think (she's) going to get (herself) to where she wants to be in spite of the school."

Another major occurrence from the last few years that has had a negative impact on public schools has been the implementation of the Common Core curriculum. Jessica talked at length how the implementation of Common Core directly impacted her decision to home school:

> When she went into kindergarten they were just beginning to implement the changes related to Common Core. It did not impact us as much in kindergarten. When we got to first grade we started seeing a lot of confusion. There was a lot of time spent with the teacher trying to figure out what she was supposed to be doing because of the changes. I volunteered in the classroom and I think, and I think this was before Common Core as well as afterwards, it was kind of a one size fits all classroom. In other words you have a lot of different levels academically, and I think the need of the classroom, of this particular classroom was at a fairly low level and I felt like most of the time was being spent trying to bring the low level up to par, and I just didn't feel like she was getting a whole lot at her level.

Dawn also had a very negative view of Common Core. She said, "The only other thing I really don't like coming back, if we do come back to the public school, is that stupid Common Core curriculum." From this section, it is clear to see that parents, especially parents of academically gifted students, are very concerned about the quality of the programs being offered to their children. Whether it is the standard curriculum or enrichment opportunities, parents are on a constant search for the best offerings for their children.

Implementation of new programs. A few years ago, Davis County Schools launched a new middle school with a STEM focus. This school is located on the Davis High campus. As the school has developed, it has been met with mixed reviews and has caused some parents to question the support given to new programs by the school system's administration. David's son attended middle school here and freely admits the way the school was run led him not to consider Davis High when it came time to transition to high school. He said, "He was in the STEM program and it was a new program and it really wasn't what we thought it would be, so that was one of the factors why we decided not to go that route." Even though the middle school itself is a separate

entity from Davis High, being associated with the campus led to a decision to leave for the Early College. He goes on to describe the school the following way:

> It, you know, it was supposed to be all like hands-on geared towards, you know, I was expecting more than what they were doing because he's a real hands-on kind of learner, but what we really got were a lot of, just to be honest, meaningless projects is what it was. I thought they would go and have all these, you know, trips to IBM and I think they took one.

Another aspect of the implementation of this new school that concerned parents was the administration of the school. Initially, a principal was not put in place and other staff members ran the school. David states:

> The third year of the program they were starting to recognize the kinks and trying to—they hired a fulltime principal instead of having a technology person per se from the school, they hired a fulltime administrator who had an administrator's license to run the school and it was, and the parent contact started to be a bigger thing and the management in the classroom seemed to have been going better.

Bridget provided a unique view to the discussion of the STEM school. While her daughter did not attend the school, she knew a lot of the students that did as well as their parents. She thought the recruiting efforts of the middle school were a bit suspect. She states:

> The STEM program has accepted the majority, if not all AIG students, therefore taking more of the top-notch students out of a regular middle school setting. Taking all of those kids out has kind of made that an elitist, almost like a charter or private. It's a feeble attempt to compete with other schools.

Parents' previous experiences with Davis County Schools clearly were a driving force in their decisions to begin the school choice process. As a reminder, nine of the ten

parent participants in this study began their children's education in the traditional public school system before making other choices. The two parents who did not move their children shared many stories that led them to regret keeping them there. For example, both parents discussed issues with teacher turnover at Davis High. Bridget was also concerned about the quality of the programs being offered. Linda described the overall environment at Davis High as chaotic. These experiences acted as the catalyst that led to the next section of my research, which describes how parents went about their choice work.

Choice Work

After parents decided to begin the school choice process, they had to begin their choice work. This is the phase of the process that encompasses all of the steps parents took in order to make what they thought was the best school choice decision for their children. From the data collected from the participants, most of the choice work can be placed into three categories: School Research, Program Offerings, and Social Networks.

School Research

For the parents of Davis County, school research was very important. They spent a great deal of time and energy learning about these different options, and in many cases, took multiple steps in order to gain a complete picture of the school they were considering for their children. While all of the schools available to these parents have an online presence which includes a website as well as social media accounts, the participants in my study rarely used this option as a form of research, much to my

surprise. These parents learned about their options through face-to-face school visits and conducting critical conversations with school personnel.

Before I explore the various visits that parents made to different schools, I'd like to share the stories of two parents who did not make one. Linda and Bridget, the parents who chose Davis High, opted not to conduct a school visit, but for different reasons. Linda tells her story below:

> I think we really looked hard at Davis High versus Davis Early College, that was the big choice to do, you know. But I think when I talked to (my daughter) and I was afraid that if she really didn't want to go to Early College, I really didn't want to force the issue, because I was afraid she wasn't going to do as well if that's not where she wanted to be.

From this quote, you can see that Linda wanted to look at other options, specifically the Early College, but her daughter did not want to attend. According to Linda, the ultimate decision to choose Davis High was primarily motivated by her daughter's social concerns. She stated, "I think it was more of all my friends are going (to Davis High). I won't know a lot of people there." Linda's quotes demonstrate how much input her daughter had in her school choice decision, and she ultimately wanted her to be happy with her school experience in order to achieve academic success.

Linda also has a younger son who is still in elementary school. Because of her experience with her older daughter's high school education, she plans to do things much differently with him. She stated, "I'm probably going to visit quite a few of them (school choices) and see exactly what they have to offer." This is yet another example of how a previous experience with a school or school system can impact choice work.

Bridget did not go on a school visit as well, opting for Davis High. She explained her decision the following way, "I didn't really do any research. I'm a product from public school. My husband's a product of public school. All my family went to public school. There was never a question." Bridget and her family have a long-standing tradition of attending public school, so that made her decision an easy one. Her daughter did apply and was accepted into the Early College, but they opted not to attend. I will explain more about this decision when I discuss the impact of social networks.

Before moving her son to Jones Academy, Dawn took multiple trips to the school, each time having several questions for the staff. She described her visits in the following way:

> We made two or three visits up there. I went in and I met with (the assistant headmaster), I believe, yeah, and then we went and talked to the teachers, the two teachers he would have had when we went into the fifth or sixth grade because there was two of them at that time and we talked to them, and we took a little bit of a tour and I asked some questions and then before we made our final decision we went back up again with some more questions and that's when we decided to make the jump.

Debra also made a visit to Jones Academy before moving her children. In her opinion, it was the visit and having the opportunity to talk to the staff that helped her make her final decision. She stated, "I came in and met the teachers, they were really excited about him (Phillip) running the school and it just really made me feel good about making a change for them." For these two parents, having the ability to conduct choice work at the school, to be able to talk to the staff and ask questions, made the their decision to move their children an easy one. Being able to see where their children

would be and talk to the staff before enrolling made them feel at home and comfortable with their decision.

Stephanie shared that she had many of the same experiences when she was looking to enroll her children in Davis Early College. In speaking about the availability of the staff, she said,

> It was pretty easy for me to come and talk to the teachers and I could call in the middle of the day and there was always somebody answering the phone and giving me my appointment, or if we had any trouble or anything, this school is very open and accessible for anybody to come and converse with the teachers or with the staff in general.

While school visits helped some parents make the decision to send their children to a particular school, some visits went a long way to eliminate certain options. Jessica recounted her families experiences with school visits, "A lot of the options that we explored were out of the way. We went to the open houses and kind of looked at the numbers. The cost and the schedules and everything." For Jessica, factors such as the distance from the home, tuition costs, and schedules led her to eventually decide to home school her daughter.

In most cases, parents visited the school they were considering for their children's education. In some cases, the school visited the parents before their final decision was made. Both parents who chose Stevens Charter School, Tiffany and Stacy, told stories of how school employees made personal visits to their homes to talk to them about the opportunity. For Stacy, Robert came to her house, and she had a lot of questions for him upon his arrival, "We went, I'm pretty sure I was the hottest parent when he visited my

house, I mean we, we really went around at my table." She went on to describe her experience with Robert the following way:

> What they do is like they go to every parent's house, every single child that's in their school. They sit down with us, with the parents and the child and they go step by step on what the school is about, their priorities, what is required of the students, what is required of the parents, and what is required of the staff. I mean and if you don't understand, once again, he's, he or she is sitting right there to break it down to you. The child, which, well (my daughter), he was asking her questions at the time. She had to do a math problem, you know, on her own and she just, so he talked one-on-one with (her), so I thought that was fabulous.

Tiffany described a similar experience:

> So one of the things that they do when you first apply and you get accepted is they do a home visit, and they come out and they really sit down with you and they sit down with the kid and they actually came out to our house. They do a home visit for every kid, and they sit down and they show you pretty much the difference in the hours academically that Stevens Charter spends versus other schools, and how much more instructional time they'll get.

For both of these parents, the personal touch Stevens Charter School provided had a major impact on their final decision to enroll their children there. In my interviews, only the parents of Stevens Charter School mentioned this type of home visit. To provide this for over one hundred students every year shows the dedication the staff has to this effort.

Program Offerings

As parents were conducting their research on these schools, they were looking specifically at the various programs that each school offered. In many cases, it was a specific program that led the parent to make a school choice decision. In other cases, it

was the lack of a specific program that eliminated a particular school from consideration. Bridget, who has previously shared that her daughter applied to Davis Early College, opted not to go there and enroll in Davis High, did so because of Early College's lack of some of the traditional high school programs and experiences. She stated, "We decided that because of band, which we were hoping to be a good thing and some other traditional high school experiences, that's what we opted for."

A band program was also a point of contention for Dawn. While she has already moved her son from the public schools to Jones Academy, she is considering another move because of their lack of a band program. She stated,

> We are actually thinking about putting him in (another area charter school) out here, and one of the things they do have is they do have a music program that's on, that's an elective. It's a small band, but at least they have that worked into the curriculum, where at Jones Academy they have a teacher up there, like one of the parents who has basically taken on trying to have a small band and the kids kind of fit it into lunch time and it's, yeah, that's my biggest critique there.

For the parents who chose Davis Early College, the draw was the access to college courses their kids would have. Having this access made them feel their kids were getting a head start on their future. According to David, "I decided to bring him to the Early College because he would be able to take the college classes and get a step up." Stephanie had the same sentiment about the Early College, saying,

> Well here, here at Early College I think also it is offering the extra classes that they are taking for their associate's degree, the college classes. That piece, I think it is very important for a lot of kids nowadays . . . They are prepared to take these classes, and in other schools I see or it used to be that they didn't have that advantage of going and taking the classes, the college classes to succeed and get out of the high school faster, which I'm seeing it here at the Early College. That's

> what Early College offers for the kids, preparing them and preparing them to go directly into college, and not just to graduate and after graduation ask the question, "What after this?"

Having listened to the participants explain their academic concerns to me in regards to their previous experiences with the traditional public school system, it came as no surprise that they all, regardless of which option they chose, were looking for an academic advantage for their children. They want their children challenged and prepared to enter college upon graduation. Debra stated about her decision to enroll her children in Jones Academy, "I wanted a place that would challenge my children academically, they really needed that, that challenge and to be pushed a little bit academically." Dawn shared the same feelings about her decision in regards to Jones Academy, "It wasn't that I wanted to pull him out of the public school environment as much as I was concerned about his learning ability for—to get him ready to go to college."

Even though Stacy's daughter is in elementary school, she is convinced that Stevens Charter School is preparing her daughter now for college. In fact one of the school's mottos is that every child can attend the college of their choice. Based on her views of the academic program there, Stacy knows her daughter will be successful:

> The high quality of education, how every student will go to the college of their choice. Even though my daughter was leaving (her elementary school), coming to the fourth grade I was looking ahead for my daughter. If my daughter can go to the, if this school say that my daughter can go to the college of her choice then that's a wonderful idea.

Tiffany was convinced that Stevens Charter School was the ideal place for her son after looking at their track record of success. She stated:

> I looked at the academics, their scores, where they were versus everybody else, finances, couldn't afford private school, and even look—even if we wanted to and we had the money, their scores didn't show us what we wanted to see as far as changing (our son's) school.

When it comes to the choice work parents conducted before making their school choice decision, they spent a lot of time conducting research, taking visits, and learning about the various programs each school provided. While parents spent a great deal of time looking at the schools, reviewing their success, and talking to the staff members, they relied most heavily on their social networks to make their final decision.

Social Networks

Despite all the visits, the conversations with staff members, looking at the numbers, and seeing what programs the various schools had to offer, the participants in this study utilized their social networks to make a school decision. These social networks included friends, neighbors, family members, and online communities who had experience with the school the parents were considering. Once parents used their social networks to make a school choice decision, they in turn became a part of social networks for other parents going through the same decision making process. In almost all cases, these parents' social networks helped them make their school choice decision. But in some cases, the social network can cause a parent to make a decision against the school they were considering.

Making decisions through social networks. Participants in this study were greatly influenced by their social networks when it came time to make a school choice decision. For the home school parents in the study, Ann and Jessica, having access to

other home school parents both face-to-face as well as online helped cement their decisions. One of my greatest takeaways from this study is just how connected the home school community is. For Ann, her neighbor introduced her to the idea of home schooling, "I had a neighbor who had always homeschooled her children and she had two daughters, they were college, and she had done it for that long so a lot of the information I got from her was a huge help." Once Ann made the leap into home schooling, she found there were many online communities of home school parents who networked together, "I just kind of learned on my own, searching online communities. There's a lot of online communities for homeschooling."

When Jessica was considering home schooling her daughter, the scope of the curriculum to be taught, especially some of the more advanced high school courses seemed overwhelming. However, she found there were many parent co-ops in the area. She explained the co-ops this way:

> Say we joined a co-op, there might be five other families and what you would do was—is you would take your kids and there might be three subjects that are, that the co-op focuses on. I would teach a subject, another parent would teach a subject, you share the teaching responsibility. We've not done that, but we have a lot of friends who do that.

In addition to the co-ops, Jessica mentioned there were area camps that focused on teaching courses to home school students:

> She did it just for fun, but as you get into middle and high school they have actually paid courses that qualified instructors teach; Biology, Chemistry, things of that nature. Things that parents don't necessarily feel like experts, so you send your cute kid there and pay someone for them to take a course.

When I think of home schooling, I have always thought of the process as being very isolated, with students gaining very little access to life outside of their home. But the power of the social networks within the home school community gives children access to a much larger world, making the decision to home school your children a much easier one to make.

For parents who chose brick and mortar options over the traditional setting, having access to those social networks, learning about the school via word of mouth, played a major role in their final decision. David described his use of social networks in the following way:

> I talked to a couple of parents, a couple of my friends that we know we have children the same age. I talked to them and asked where they were gonna send their kids, and just tried to do what was right for my own child.

For David, parents in his social network confirmed via their previous experiences at the school that the Early College was the place for his son. Other parents shared similar stories. Dawn, who went on multiple school visits to Jones Academy, initially learned about the school through her son's friends as well as connections at her church, "Well, one of his best friends, and people go to our church, they go up to Jones Academy, so I've known about them since forever." Tiffany also relied on the experiences of a friend to aid in her decision, "I had a friend of mine, her daughter was one of the first kids in the first pride at Stevens Charter and she talked very highly about it and the academics and the structure and stuff."

Debra believes the small community aspect of Davis County helps spread information about school quickly. She stated, "Just being in a small community, everybody kind of knows what's going on, but I guess that's the main way, word of mouth more than anything." While Debra believes word of mouth has helped, Stephanie shared how information spread via word of mouth can skew the perceptions of a school:

> I have encountered a lot of adults, parents, that think that, for example, that the charter school was just like an elite school for kids with a little bit of economical background, that they had a little bit more money. I also perceived when my kid or like the—my oldest kid was applying to come here to the Early College; they thought they was only for the smart kids. They did not understand that it is available for everybody.

From this quote, you can see how perceptions of a school can change given the social network a parent is a part of. When parents form certain opinions about a school, whether they are true or not, they will share them within their social network and shape the decisions of other parents.

Parents become parts of other social networks. Once parents utilized their social networks and made a school choice decision, they in turn became part of other parents' social networks, helping them to make a similar decision. While most parents became advocates for their school of choice, some did not. Regardless of their opinion about the choice they made, these parents went on to have a major impact on others.

Ann has become an advocate for home schooling from her time working with her own children, and according to her, she works with many other parents to begin the process. She stated, "I help so many people now, because it's hard the first year figuring out where to go to get your information from, how to get it—set everything up and the

lesson plans and the schedules." While she is an advocate, she also warns parents about the challenges of home schooling in order to make sure their students are successful. She said:

> I let them know it's not easy. It's not. You don't just pull your kids out of school and they get to sit home and do whatever all day, it's not that simple. There's a lot of work that goes into it, because now you're the teacher, and if you have more than one child, you've got to teach all three. And that's usually the first thing I tell them, you gotta be ready for a lot of paperwork, you have to keep up with absolutely everything, because if it's not, it's going to hurt them in the end.

Stacy was also an advocate for her school of choice and did everything in her power to share her opinion about Stevens Charter. She described her efforts as follows:

> To be honest with you, I was Stevens Charter's mouthpiece, I really was. I wore the t-shirts, I would, I mean, because everywhere I went I mean even now today I have applications in my workbag. I give them out no matter where I am. They was like I heard of that school, is that school what it cracked up to be, and I was like yes ma'am, it is. And I would just break it down to them on what they do here. And they'd be amazed and a lot of people that I have met, their students are enrolled here and they are very happy.

Dawn has had similar conversations with parents considering Jones Academy. Her talking points focused on personalized attention she feels kids get at the school. She stated:

> I do, I tell them a lot of times, the main thing I tell them is that it's the small environment, that they really get to know your kid. They're able to help in many areas because of that. It's a safe place and they offer lots of academic courses, even though they are so small, and that your child is going to be taken care of and prepared for college.

While it is true that all parents become parts of other parents' social networks, not all parents became advocates for their school. Linda, who has had a negative experience with her daughter at Davis High, tells a different story about her conversations with parents:

> Not good, not good, you know. Somebody asked me I told them keep your options open, did you look at . . . or if you can get into Early College that's probably a better option, not just so much from the college credit part, but just from school point altogether. I said it depends on the child, of course. My daughter is, my daughter is one of those thrivers, and she thrives wherever she is because she's focused. But if you don't have a child that's focused, or you have a child that kind of goes with the flow, you want to think real hard about where you put them.

In my interviews with these parents, I came across a fascinating story regarding social networks that is quite the outlier. Bridget, who previously mentioned she wanted her daughter to go to Davis High because of her family tradition of attending public schools, who mentioned they chose Davis High because of the band program and other traditional school opportunities, told of how her social network worked against her when it came to making a school choice decision. Bridget's husband was an employee in the school system at the time of this event. She describes the events below:

> (My daughter) was accepted to Early College and we filled out the paperwork, we did the interviews, we went, we met with the administration there, we were all good to go. (My husband) being employed in that same school system, being highly educated, my husband and I received word that a school board member was questioning as to why our daughter was accepted into that program. It was given to us that she was a lottery winner, that the people that made these acceptances knew nothing of the child, they only saw an application. We were cautioned heavily as to continue with taking her to Early College.

Social networks are powerful tools that had a major impact on the participants in this study. In most cases, parents gained positive insights into the school they were considering, and they in turn advocated for their school with others. In some cases misconceptions, negative experiences, and in Bridget's case, unwarranted pressure was put upon the parents. All of the elements of choice work (research, program offerings, social networks) prepared parents to make a school choice decision. In this final section, I will explore how parents went about forming their choice set.

Choice Set

After the participants in this study completed their choice work, they created their choice set, or a list of schools they were considering for their children. In order to make a final decision from their choice set, parents had to weigh many different factors. These factors would determine what school they would send their children to, and what type of education they would receive. The factors that impacted the participants in this study the greatest were student voice, cost, and transportation. Additionally, the home school parents in this study were looking for a great deal of flexibility for their children.

Student Voice

Almost all of the participants in this study discussed that their children had a great deal of influence on their school choice decision. This came as a bit of a surprise to me initially because I had not seen this type of information in my literature review. However, in my work with school choice the last few years, I have heard more and more parents talking about this topic. In this study, students have had a voice in both their initial school placement as well as the continued placement in their school of choice.

For the parents who chose Davis High, their children's views heavily influenced the final decision. While we have chronicled Bridget's story with her daughter's placement and the tremendous influence social networks had upon her, the ultimate decision to choose Davis High and not fight against negative influences came down to her daughter's desire to remain in contact with other students she had been around for a number of years. She stated,

> Those were the kids that she had grown up with and I think that consistency of a friend group, she'll graduate with kids that she went to kindergarten with and even kids that she went to daycare with before that, and so that consistency was extremely important.

Linda really wanted her daughter to go to Early College, but she was set on going to Davis High because of the social aspect of the traditional school, saying, "I think it was more of a—my friends are going (to Davis High). I won't know a lot of people there." Linda also mentioned the fact that Davis Early College is on a community college campus had an impact on her daughter's refusal to include it in their choice set. She said, "I don't know what it was, that just didn't appeal to her . . . it might have been different if it had been in its own building and been its own, you know, its own school, you know, like Davis High." For both of these parents, their children's desire for the consistency of the traditional school experience led them to narrow their choice set to Davis High.

While their children's comfort was a major influence on the traditional school parents to not make a different choice for their children, parents who did make a change also weighed it heavily. Debra described her discussion with her son about going to Jones Academy the following way:

> I actually did talk to my son, because he was, you know, fifth grade at the time, and we talked about the kids he already knew here. He did have two or three friends in his class that he knew, and I did have a conversation with him and we decided together that it would be a good decision for him, so he was allowed to have some input.

David shared the same sentiments in describing his conversation with his son about going to Davis Early College, "His voice was really important in making the decision because we asked where he would feel comfortable and where his, you know, his peers were going, so we wanted him to be where he thought he would be best served." Dawn also wanted her son to be comfortable with his placement at Jones Academy, but for a slightly different reason, "He went up there twice with me and the funny thing is that one of the biggest concerns is he's small, he's short. One of the biggest concerns was he didn't want to be the shortest one in the class."

Other students didn't have a lot of input into their initial placement, but they have had a voice when it comes to staying in their current school placement. Tiffany described a conversation she had with her son after his first year at Stevens Charter School the following way:

> I asked him at the end of his first year at Stevens, if you had the choice, and I'm not saying you do, what would you choose, public school or stay at Stevens and his exact words were, "I need the discipline and structure at Stevens Charter."

Ann also had a similar discussion about returning to public school from home schooling. While they decided to stay in the home school setting, Ann detailed the conversation:

> She went through a period probably a month into this last school year, and it was because she wanted to see her friends, and I talked to her about it and we discussed it because, like I said before, it is important to me that they have friends and they have that, you know, outside stuff going on. But her being 15, the age she's at, her stage of development, I just was not comfortable after her being in home school for so long, dropping her back into public school. I just didn't think it was a good idea for her. So when I talked to her later and I explained to her why, she actually agreed, so it wasn't really an argument, but I didn't just say no 'cause I said so, you know . . . I wanted her to know she has an opinion and her opinion is valuable to me and I will always listen to her opinion.

For Jessica, her daughter gives input into her home school placement by how successful she is, stating:

> The vote comes more during the year because we constantly remind her, you know, if you can't do this, if this is not working, we're gonna look at other options, so her vote gets to be how she does and responds throughout the year.

Cost

While students in several cases had some input into their school choice placement, ultimately finances came into play for many of the participants, especially parents who wanted to consider a private school option. When Tiffany was looking at options for her son, she described the cost of private schools the following way, "We couldn't afford private school, so those were out." Dawn, who previously mentioned she was considering moving her son from Jones Academy to a local charter school because of a band program, said a little bit more about why she was looking at a charter option. When I initially asked her was she looking at a charter school she said, "That's correct, and why? Mostly because it's finances." While the band program is at this local charter school is attractive to Dawn, ultimately the cost of tuition at Jones Academy is

encouraging her to look at other options, especially ones that are free. Debra also talked about the cost of tuition at Jones Academy, as she was paying for both of her children to attend there at the same time for a number of years. When I asked her if she had ever considered sending her kids back to public school, she stated:

> The only thing that would have ever made me consider that would have just been because private school's expensive. You know, it takes a lot of money to go to a private school, and you know, sometimes in the back of your mind you think, you know, a charter school is free or a public school is free and it does make you think, not that I would have moved them, but it does make you think about that. It's a free education.

Stephanie considered the private school options available to her, but did not see where her children would receive a better education for the cost. She stated:

> Well first of all, I can't afford it. Second of all, I don't think it's necessary to go and spend $20,000 for a high school when you can save that money to send your child to college. And then I have, from what I have seen the high schools, the private schools, I don't know how well the kids are prepared to go to college.

Because of the cost to attend, private schools were removed from several parents' choice sets. Even parents who did choose a private school option have at least thought about changing schools because other options are free. Bridget's quote about private school cost perfectly sums up the sentiments of many participants, "If there's an option that's free that can be managed, to me that's better than paying for it."

Transportation

After cost, transportation was another key factor in determining whether a particular school ended up in a parent's particular choice set. The traditional schools

provide door-to-door bus service, but all of the other options in Davis County do not. Jones Academy and Stevens Charter provided buses to and from certain drop off/pickup locations throughout the area, but parents must take their kids to the area in the morning and pick them up in the afternoon. Additionally, the bus service for Jones Academy is only available for an additional cost. Even the Early College requires students to ride a bus from their home to the high school they would have attended, and then ride a shuttle bus from there to the school. For the parents who talked to me about transportation, many of them discussed the sacrifices it took in order to make a school fit into their choice set.

Dawn mentioned transportation being a concern when she was looking for a new school for her son. While she signed him up for Jones Academy, she did look at other options in a neighboring county, they were simply too far away. She stated, "When you're traveling, not only do you have to think about your own commute time, but when kids are involved in things, for us it would be like forty minutes one way. So distance is a big deal."

Linda, whose children have full transportation available to them as traditional school students, does not fully use it because of the length of the day it would create for them. She takes them to school in the morning and then they ride the bus home in the afternoon. She stated, "They could ride the bus, but the bus comes so doggone early." I asked her what time the bus came, and she said "Six-thirty. That's a 12-hour day. I don't work a 12-hour day. That's too much for a child."

Linda's decision to drive her children to school in the morning is indicative of the sacrifices several parents are making in order to make the school they've placed in their choice set work for them. Tiffany shared her family's process to make sure her son can attend Stevens Charter, "He gets out at 4:10 but I don't get off 'til 5:00. My husband doesn't get off until 5:30. So right now we have a family member that meets him at the (bus drop off) and will bring him home." She went on to say their struggle was worth it when she said, "It is a struggle. I wish they had door-to-door, but it's something I'm willing to give up to have him in that school." Stacy shared the same sentiments about Stevens Charter when she said, "Wow, it's a lot of gas, I guarantee you that but, but again, but it's worth it."

Home School Flexibility

When I interviewed my home school parents, a topic came up between them that did not appear with any of my other participants. Both Ann and Jessica talked about the flexibility home schooling provides them as a key reason why they chose this route for their children. This flexibility presented itself in terms of the daily schedule their children follow. About her children's schedule, Ann said:

> It actually was easier for them than the regular public school schedule because they could start at eight o'clock. If they were tried or felt bad, they would start at nine . . . Once they got used to the schedule and figured out they could do as fast or as slow as they wanted to, they absolutely loved it.

For Ann, not only is their flexibility in start/stop times for the instructional days, there is flexibility from day to day as well. She stated:

> You know, if it's been a long period of time where they haven't had a holiday, or I'll just say you know what, you can catch up tomorrow. I will give them a day here and there, especially if they've had a rough week or they've been testing or whatever. I'll give them a day, because they can catch up any time when they're at home.

Jessica also discussed the flexibility home school provides for her daughter. Not being tied to a rigid daily schedule allows her daughter the opportunity to participate in activities like competitive gymnastics classes and piano lessons when other students are sitting in classrooms. While these opportunities are great, the flexibility home schooling provides Jessica allows her entire family a chance to be together that they may not have otherwise. She said,

> Part of why it works for us is my husband is self-employed, so he's, you know, late nights and I do a lot of his work for his–book work for him and if we didn't home school they wouldn't see their dad at all. He's gone before they wake up and he's back, you know, late.

For the home school parents, it was this flexibility that no other option provided that ultimately led them to make the decision they made. Regardless of the reason, all of the participants in my study had to weigh many options, and in some cases, make sacrifices to include various schools in their choice set.

Summary and Overview

After a brief introduction to the schools and participants, Chapter IV focused on the parents' experiences going through the school choice process. First, the chapter described previous experiences the parents had that acted as a catalyst to make a school choice decision. The environment their children were in at their current school, whether

there were issues with class size or student discipline, was a driving force for many parents. Also, personnel issues, such as teacher behavior and turnover, played a critical role for some of the participants in this study. Academic issues, such as the lack of opportunities for AIG students or the fear of new programs being unsuccessful, led parents to look for options outside of the traditional school system.

After exploring these previous experiences, the chapter discusses how parents went about their choice work. Parents conducted a great deal of research on these schools, primarily by taking many campus visits and talking with the staff and administration. They weighed the various program offerings each school had, or didn't have, when making a decision. Finally, parents relied on their social networks to gain a deeper perspective of the school they were considering. In most cases, the social networks provided positive information for the parents, but this was not the case for every participant. Social networks can also provide negative feedback, or pressure parents to make a different decision than the one they previously intended.

The chapter closes by looking at how parents included or excluded a school from their choice set. Students had a great deal of influence on their parents in their initial placement, as well as their continuing placement at a school. As it relates to private schools, the cost of tuition and other expenses forced many parents in my study to exclude them from their choice set. Transportation, and the sacrifices some parents would have to make because of a lack of transportation, was also described. Finally, the flexibility provided by home schooling was discussed.

While Chapter IV focused on parent perspectives, Chapter V will look at school choice from the view of school and school system administrators. Specifically, the chapter will explore how school administrators work to influence a parent's school decision.

CHAPTER V

ADMINISTRATOR PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL CHOICE

Chapter V focuses on the school and school system administrator participants in this study. Specifically, my intent with the administrators was to explore their efforts to shape a parent's school choice decision. The main area my questions for the administrator participants focused on was how the school/school system marketed themselves to potential parents and how they used digital media, including websites and social media, to accomplish this task. As a part of this study, I reviewed various print and electronic documents, such as fliers, enrollment applications, school websites, and social media postings to gauge how these items may have an influence on a parent when determining to include a school in their choice set.

As I interviewed these administrators, we ended up spending a great deal of time on the subject of competition and how the schools compete for student enrollments and the resources (dollars) that come with each enrollment. It is this competition that drives the administrators need to market their school. There was a great deal of talk that centered on the need to "level the playing field" amongst the schools, as there are different policies in place for each type of school. It was interesting though to hear each administrator describe their view of leveling the playing field, as it varied greatly depending on which school they were a part of.

Finally, an interesting outlier appeared during my interview that was specifically an issue for the private school, Jones Academy. Because there is so much competition and a number of choices are available in the small, poor, rural community of Davis County, private schools may soon be a thing of the past. The economic issues facing a number of people in Davis County is making the cost of attending Jones Academy an impossibility for most parents. The growing number of free options in the area could lead to the eventual closing of this school.

Table 3

School Administrator Participants

Administrator	Position
Alex	Principal of Davis High School
Matthew	Principal of Davis Early College
Teresa	Assistant Superintendent of Davis County Schools
Phillip	Headmaster of Jones Academy
Robert	Executive Director of Stevens Charter School

School/School System Marketing

The primary reason for including administrators in this study was to see how they worked to influence a parent's school choice decision through marketing efforts. What I learned from these participants was most of the marketing is done through face-to-face communication. This really did not come as a surprise given that parents mainly learned about their options by visiting schools and talking to the staff. In addition to talking to parents during school visits and various other opportunities, many of the administrator

participants felt the use of student ambassadors was another great way to market their schools. Seeing the students perform both in and out of the classroom, in the opinion of these participants, was the ultimate marketing tool. These opportunities to talk to parents and for parents to see the students went a long way to influence members of their social networks.

While word of mouth is the primary way of marketing for schools in Davis County, there is a growing use of digital media by these administrators. As I describe these resources, which includes websites and social media outlets, I conducted a document analysis of these accounts. My main purpose in doing this was to see exactly how and what each school is promoting on these sites, and how that may have influenced a parent's school choice decision.

Face-to-Face Communication

While interviewing all four of the school-based administrators and talking to them about the subject of school marketing, they all mentioned they spend a great deal of time talking with parents face-to-face. Alex likes to talk about all of the improvements that are occurring at Davis High, but he doesn't shy away from talking to parents about things that still need improvement. He said,

> From a school that had a lot of bad days, we have either pretty good days or okay days; we don't have bad days anymore. And I—if we did, I would say we did, because I'm very much—whereas I will tell, I would prefer to tell the good things that are going on, I also don't shy away from discussing the less positive things.

When I asked Alex how he talked to parents about some of the negative things while convincing parents to send their kids to Davis High, he explained he talks about the

school's past success, and that now is great opportunity to be a part of the rebuilding of the school. He stated,

> I talk about the tradition of excellence in the—within the school, and although we have some areas to work on, we are expecting excellence, and it's a great time to be a part of this school because you're being a part of the turnaround. You're being—you're benefitting from the things we've already done, but it's a great opportunity to come in and help build something bigger than themselves.

Phillip, as part of his marketing strategy with parents, emphasizes the academic rigor of Jones Academy and that every child graduates and goes to college. He said,

> We look at ourselves as a college prep program. Our desire is 12th grade, 100% graduation, 100% the ability to be college bound. I say that because, you know, inevitably every couple of years we'll have a student who chooses the military, but graduating they have the requirements to go on to college.

On the other hand, Alex, as part of his marketing strategy with parents, emphasizes that while the public high schools in Davis County may not send all of their students to college, more of them stay and finish. He said,

> I point out that our local private high schools send a huge, nearly a 100% of their children to college, and they last exactly one semester. And by the—after Christmas that year, those schools have about 20% of their kids who are back in school and the 80% are at home doing something else, whereas public schools in our county send about 65–70% of their kids to a public institution, and of that close to 80–85% finish and continue and go on and make lives for themselves.

When I interviewed Matthew, the recruiting/application period was just getting underway for Davis Early College. His approach to marketing through face-to-face

communication was not to focus on any other school's successes or failures, but to just go about the work of talking about his school. He said:

> I don't compete where I got out and talk junk about the other schools, you know. I will go out and, like next week I'm going to the middle schools and talking to the eighth graders. Next week and the following week I'm having some parent sessions where they can come ask questions, find out information on what we do.

For Matthew, these information sessions will lead to parents dropping in and visiting the school, where he always takes time to meet the parent. He gave the following example, "I just had a parent yesterday, you know, she was, she came, she dropped in and I always will take time to talk to whoever comes in." While the majority of his talks with parents happen on campus, Matthew realizes he is always an ambassador for the school and conversations about Davis Early College can happen anywhere:

> Any time I'm anywhere, well we were, where were we, I was somewhere and I saw a parent, Food Lion probably or Wal-Mart or something, you know how that goes. And you'll see a parent and next thing you know they're talking with another person and, you know, you're introduced as the principal of the Early College and how's it going and next thing you know you're talking about it, you know.

As Robert was starting Stevens Charter, not only did he expect to speak to parents out in the community, he planned for it. In order to reach his targeted demographic, he knew he had to take his message out to his potential parents. He said:

> If we're gonna be a school that is predominantly gonna recruit low income areas, then we should be using those types of means, or I guess those types of methods to reach that, that demographic. So we went to churches, we went to shopping centers, we went to recreation basketball leagues and then we also did a couple community forums down at the library that we advertised for and had families

> there. We also canvased the neighborhood as well, and so those things provided us a certain level of access and a certain level of credibility that one, to your point, engaged them in a dialogue and give them the time to do that because we were in front of them. They weren't hearing it through a newspaper, but they were hearing it from the person who's creating it and doing it.

As time has gone on and Stevens Charter has experienced some academic success, Robert's message to parents is one that attempts to counteract misconceptions about the school:

> My point would be that to make sure that the misconception of you have to be smart to go here doesn't come out, and so we don't want yeah, we're an A-plus school and suddenly every family around who has kids that are failing EOGs, struggling, years behind now say ooh, I don't know if you can go there, that's that smart school, we don't want that. We'd rather you say that's a school you gotta work hard at. It doesn't matter what your level is, but yeah, when you go, when you come here you do have to work hard.

As Phillip discusses enrollment at Jones Academy with parents, he believes open and honest communication with them and keeping the focus on the child is the key to his success. He stated,

> I'm gonna be honest with you what I envision will come about if in fact they were to become a student here, and that honesty up front in some cases eases them because they know that I am here for the child hopefully and they will believe me . . . As we go through this process I am going to be honest and upfront with you that the most important thing to me is that child, because when you enroll that child, that child becomes my child, and I don't want anything to create what will be a negative roadblock, environment, obstacle, whatever it happens to be, for your child. I will tell you my true thoughts because I never want to set a child up for failure in any way, shape, or form, and I start the conversation with that. Thank you for coming. Have you ever been here before? All of those things, tell them a little bit about the school, a little bit about me, but then okay, it's going to be about your child.

Student Ambassadors

In addition to parents visiting these schools and talking to the staff, the school leaders want them to see their students in action. To them, the students are the best promoters of their schools. If parents get an opportunity to see the students, they then can envision their children going to these schools. Opportunities to see the students can occur on visits or out in public. Alex stated:

> The best example I can give anyone is to send good kids to where they are and let them see the citizen, the good citizens we have at our school, so children are going places and doing things and being a part, and they're being good citizens of the school and of the community. So that is to me the most authentic assessment I can give anybody.

Seeing the students out in the community can occur in several different ways. Parents might see band students or other student groups out in the community performing or completing community service. In Robert's case, he does a great deal of work out in the community to recruit students. He puts a great deal of time and effort into his community meetings and to talking to the parents about Stevens Charter, "But the biggest thing is making sure these students are the ambassadors." Matthew has also seen his students representing the school more out in the community. He pointed out, "Our student government is getting more involved going out into the community." While the Early College students are branching out more into the community, they are most comfortable meeting parents and community members on their campus. As the school has gained popularity, more community groups have visited to see what the school is all about. Matthew shared the following story:

> Last week we had a bunch of preachers got together and they wanted to come through and see what's going on and so we, you know, we're always open to whoever wants to come by and look at us, talk to us, talk to the kids, and that's another thing, people when they come through they, they're amazed at how comfortable our kids are talking with them because it happens all the time.

In this world of marketing the schools in Davis County now find themselves in, not only is the administration and staff constantly in a state of school promotion, so are the students. Any opportunity potential parents get to see representatives of the school, whether it is at a formal school event or in the grocery store, they are judging whether or not to send their children there. This may be the ultimate form of school marketing.

Digital Media

A form of marketing that is just starting to develop in Davis County is the use of available digital media, which includes websites and social media accounts. Websites have been around in schools for a number of years, but they are transitioning away from housing basic information about the school to a tool to highlight positive attributes for potential parents. Given that social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are free and used by a wide audience, it only seems natural they would be included in this new state of school marketing.

From a district perspective, Davis County Schools has embraced the social media world, thanks in part to a new superintendent who pushes his staff to use this tool. Alex described the district's evolution the following way:

> Our previous superintendent, I think he appreciated technology and appreciated the advancement in instructional technology and social media, but was not comfortable with it, therefore the school was not—school system was not encouraged whereas our new superintendent is—encouragement is a light for—to

> you know, he got, at the open convocation he took, he immediately that day put 500 school employees on a Twitter feed, and made it okay and showed, you know, what—we're just, just something as simple as having a Twitter feed and tweeting things about your kids, or your school, or your community.

Teresa further explained why they began using social media, "We have children who use social media, parents who use social media. We just make sure, you know, when it comes to the school system we just use it in the way that helps our parents and helps our students." One of the ways they've engaged parents through social media is by the use of Twitter chats. Teresa described the first Twitter chat they conducted by saying, "It was great, it was great, you know. We did it like from eight to nine one night and got on and start talking about some educational topics and it was great! It went really well." I asked her to describe the format of the Twitter chat and she explained, "We put out four questions that we kind of talked about and kind of geared our conversations toward those four topics." Using social media in this way is great way to engage parents in talking about school in a non-traditional setting, where parents may not be able to physically go to the school for various reasons.

Looking at the various websites and social media accounts for Davis County Schools and the two schools in my study, I found several uses of marketing tools. The Davis County Schools website and social media accounts were filled with student and staff features, and there were several news stories highlighting various activities going on throughout the district. There were several pictures of students and staff. They all featured diverse populations. I found it interesting that none of the pictures were from athletic events. All of the pictures were at graduations or students in the classroom

working with teachers. This to me shows the district's commitment to the academic success of all its students.

On its Twitter account, I found a video titled, "What's Super About Public Schools?" that featured students talking about all of the opportunities available to them in Davis County Schools. This was the one pure marketing video I could find. Overall, Davis County Schools appears to be an inclusive school system that goes out of its way to promote all the positive things that are going on within the district. Given some of negative statistics about the school system that have been discussed previously, the district appears to be taking steps to change its perception in the community.

While the school district, from a central office perspective, has fully embraced the use of electronic marketing, Davis High and Davis Early College have not embraced it to same level. Davis High does not have a Facebook or Twitter account dedicated to the school. I did find a Davis High Counselors Twitter account and their tweets appear on the school's website. Overall, the website had many pictures of a diverse population of students, many of them showed students in the classroom, at graduation, or various award ceremonies. None of the pictures on the website featured student athletes, which again shows the school's focus on turning around its negative perceptions in the community by focusing on academic success. The counselor Twitter account had many pictures of students receiving college acceptance letters. While the level of promotion does not match that of the district, what they do use promotes the academic success of a diverse student body.

Davis Early College does not have a Facebook account, but they do use Twitter and they have a school website. Matthew uses the Twitter account mainly to share basic school information. He explained, "Most of our kids don't do Twitter either, you know there's Snapchat and all that but they still, they will go and look at our site every once in a while." Still, I found pictures on their Twitter account of students and teachers working together in classrooms. The pictures portrayed a very diverse population of students.

I also found the school's enrollment application on their website. Outside of the basic demographic information, the application requires two essays that must be handwritten. The essay questions are:

1. What does motivation mean to you?
2. Name a time you experienced defeat or a setback. What did you learn from that experience? How did you rectify the situation?

These essay questions could be intimidating to an eighth-grade student who may struggle academically, which could discourage a potential applicant. Additionally, the application requires two teacher recommendations to be filled out by staff at the student's current school. The recommendation form asks teachers to rate the student as Exceptional, Above Average, Average, or Below Average in several areas, such as Academic Performance, Ambition, Confidence, and Potential for Success. This too could potentially intimidate some applicants, thus eliminating some students from ever going.

At Stevens Charter, Robert states the school has embraced the use of technology to promote the school:

> Yeah, I think we're just scratching the surface with how we can use our website and any means, but we do use it as a way of accessing parents, letting them enroll during that. Using that to get information about school, using it. We do use social media, Facebook and Twitter and things like that to get the word out. It's really about making sure it sticks.

What I found on their website and social media accounts indicates they do indeed embrace these tools and use them to promote their school. While their Facebook and Twitter accounts mainly shared updates with parents such as weather delays and upcoming events, there were still a number of posts that included pictures of students and staff working in the classroom setting. It is clear that Stevens Charter uses their website as their main electronic resource for marketing. On the website, I found a professionally edited promotional video that highlighted the school's mission and academic successes. There was also a whole section on the website that highlighted their test scores, report card grades, and comparisons of their results as measured against Davis County Schools and the state of North Carolina.

On their website, you can actually complete and submit the school's application. When compared to the Early College application, it is much simpler. It only asks for very basic demographic information (name, address, phone number, student's date of birth). There are no essays or recommendations needed to apply. There is also a school brochure available for download in both English and Spanish.

What is missing from the school's website and social media accounts is evidence of a diverse student body. Robert previously stated the school is, "86% poverty, 95% students of color", so the images and promotional materials reflect these percentages. This has led to the assumption among various social networks in Davis County that the

school does not want Caucasian students to enroll there. On the contrary, Robert would like a more diverse population. He stated, "We want Caucasian students, so that would be a misconception. We would want Caucasian, low-income students." In order to achieve his goal of recruiting more Caucasian students to Stevens Charter, Robert will have to put a great deal of effort into correcting the misconceptions about his school.

Jones Academy's website was devoid of any pictures, except in the staff directory, which only had two minority teachers. The rest of the staff is Caucasian. The section of their website with the most detailed information available to parents pertained to tuition, fees, and payment schedules. The school has a Twitter account, but it had not been updated since May 2015. It is clear that Jones Academy puts most of its effort into Facebook. There are posts almost daily. In some cases, there are multiple posts in a single day. The majority of these posts highlight teacher-student interaction, bringing to the forefront the school's college preparatory philosophy.

Jones Academy is also missing evidence of a diverse student body. I could find no posts that included students of color in my search, which went back several months. Phillip acknowledges the lack of diverse population, "Socioeconomics is a difficult one, and it does go into the racial component as well. Socioeconomics is the number one negative factor for us." Given the high cost of attendance in an impoverished area like Davis County, the overwhelming majority of parents who can afford to send their children there are Caucasian. Also, given the costs involved with the school, it will be next to impossible to correct this issue.

Another interesting trend appeared in the school's Facebook posts. Several of them had to deal with money. The school is constantly asking parents to participate in fundraiser events. Additionally, the school recently posted a flyer to its account that offered a 30% reduction in tuition for a select number of new enrollments in Pre-K through 6th grade. The school is offering to waive the enrollment fee ($400) for parents who work in the fields of law enforcement, EMT, active military, and veterans. The school appears to be recruiting parents to the school who in many cases may not be able to afford the cost to attend the school by offering these cost reductions. My conversation with Phillip, which will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter, along with the number of Facebook posts about money indicate the school is struggling financially and will need to continue to recruit and promote itself in this way if it is to continue to operate.

Competition

While interviewing the administrator participants for this study, the topic of competition came up. It was fascinating to listen to them describe competition between the choices in Davis County. What became clear is if your school was struggling to maintain enrollments, the administrator had a negative of competition and choice. Conversely, if the school was thriving, the administrator saw choice as a good thing.

As previously stated, Davis High has not been described in the most flattering way by parents in this study (high teacher turnover, discipline issues, etc.). These feelings get shared throughout several parents' social networks, which in turn leads parents to make a school choice decision. Because of these negative views, Davis High

has seen a steady decline in enrollments. Alex stated, "I have a building that at one time housed nearly 3,000 children. Now there are two schools on the campus, with about between faculty, students, roughly 1,200 people that are in my care on a daily basis." The negative opinions along with the declining enrollment cause Alex to view school choice in a negative way. He stated,

> Well the official technical definitions that I perceive, school choice is a parent weighing the options that they have for their child, and trying to make a decision, trying to peer into a crystal ball and what will help that child be a productive citizen early on. That's as nice a definition as I can give you. A more practical definition from my perspective is it's an uninformed, non-educator trying to make a decision on the basis of gossip, emotions, bigotry, misguided perceptions, or petty insignificant reasons.

Alex also strongly felt parents, specifically Caucasian parents, were making these decisions based on race. He said,

> I have experienced many a charter or private school that 100% of the parents' motivation is of sending them there is to keep them away from what they perceived as an unsavory element in the community, and not just in our current community. This is the fifth school system that I've been a part of, and there have been school systems where Caucasian parents have sent their children, their Caucasian children, to a 100% Caucasian private school simply to avoid a situation where they might be with someone with different skin color, perspectives, experiences, and expectations than themselves. In other words, that antiquated concept or—and really misguided concept of here's to us, here's to those, here's to us of those like us, and nobody else. It's racist, it's not founded on what's best for the child in our global shrinking world, it fails to prepare a child for what they're going to—what and who they're going to encounter over a lifespan of hopefully 80-plus years.

Phillip, who was in Davis County at Jones Academy long before the charter schools appeared, shared a similar negative feeling towards the new choices. He said,

"There wasn't a competitiveness between the private schools and the public schools, but there was a competitiveness between the charter schools, dollars and things like that coming right out of it, and so I did have a negative belief system towards it." Jones Academy is also seeing a steady decline in enrollments now that more free choice options are in the area. This will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

While the leaders of the two schools in my study who are losing enrollments have negative feelings about the school choice movement, the leaders of schools that do not have enrollment issues have a much different point of view. Every year, Robert has a waiting list of students wanting to enroll at Stevens Charter. He sees school choice in a positive light, and that competition makes all schools better. He stated,

> This is what America should be about, the fact that everybody in it together to one, have some healthy competition, to be the best we can be to serve kids because ultimately the families need to make the choices about what's best for them, and the same with any marketplace, whether somebody's gonna go buy a shirt and they're deciding which store to buy it from, a car or what not, that healthy competition is—improves the quality of the product as well as the opportunities for the consumer.

Matthew, who also has a waiting list of students every year wishing to enroll at Davis Early College, does not fear competition because he provides an excellent product. He said, "It's competition, you know, if you've got a better product give it to them, you know, makes people better I always feel, you know, the more competitive people are the better they usually get."

Leveling the Playing Field

As the participants were discussing the concept of competition between the various choices, the topic of leveling the playing field came up. This concept was primarily discussed in terms of the charter schools having more flexibility from a policy standpoint than do traditional public school systems. Alex pointed out, "Charter schools are, by law, not required to have a full group of teachers who are certified." Teresa, who works in the central office of Davis County Schools, also feels charter schools have an unfair advantage in terms of not having the same standards of teacher certification. She stated:

> I have an issue with that because we're all trying to educate children, so if rules are for the betterment of the organization, if rules look after children, then that's the way it should be across the board. Because we suffer, we have suffered with some things. Some real great teachers had certification issues . . . I just know some of the charters around here, the people in those charters or running those charters used to be employed with our school system.

Because charters usually use an application and lottery system, are not required to provide transportation or participate in the free and reduced lunch program, Alex and Teresa feel as if they are not set up to compete on a level playing field with these schools. Alex stated, "I don't buy the academic successes of schools who could pick and choose who they want in their building. If they want to compete, they need to take everybody like we do." Teresa stated,

> My whole idea about it is if it's state supported, okay, then it has to follow state guidelines and rules. We just need to leverage that playing field, you know. If it's state supported, receive state funding, then it has to, you know, have to do everything that all state-funded schools and school systems have to do.

In my interview with Robert, he acknowledged he has greater flexibility granted to him through policy and understands why other entities would want what he has. He said,

> A lot of people will say that there's some unfair rules or things like that charter schools get and they actually have a point, and I know that's not the point of your dissertation, they have a point. There is some autonomy that charter schools get that if you were on a, from a different vantage point you might, I don't say, I don't think you'd say that's unfair but you would say we need to have that.

This acknowledgement aside, Robert sees the concept of leveling the playing field in a different light as compared to Alex and Teresa. He feels Stevens Charter levels the playing field for a different demographic in Davis County, giving them an option they wouldn't otherwise have. He said,

> What was troubling for us, I guess six years ago was before we started, and the reason why Stevens Charter was created, was because we felt our low-income children didn't have many, if any, opportunities outside the traditional public school system. The other charter school didn't offer some of the same services we do that allow us to accommodate or adhere to the needs of, of a population that again, is predominantly low-income, and the private schools were out of reach financially, and so we felt there was a real need, going back to your question, of choice, to provide this alternative option, to provide this choice for families as they consider what's best for their child and their future.

Matthew does not fear competition at Davis Early College and he does not have a particularly negative opinion on the concept of competing. However, he did share a story that indicates the playing field is not level for students wishing to leave Stevens Charter for his school. He said, "Stevens Charter makes it harder to apply here because they

don't—they tell their teachers not to do recommendations." When I asked him how he knew this, he said,

> A parent told me that. I said well just try (to get the recommendation), and then I had a second parent tell me that. That was last year and I said, so I called that first parent and I said don't try, just go ahead and give us the application. Because they were saying they were, it's like the teachers were making it harder on the kids when they started to apply, they were taking it out on them or something. I said I'm not going for that.

Because of the issues securing teacher recommendations from Stevens Charter staff, Davis Early College no longer requires them from that school's applicants in order to level the playing field for them. Matthew also shared another fascinating story of how parents try to tilt the playing field in their direction. He shared the following:

> I constantly have parents trying to buy their way in, you know. He was going, the kid didn't get in (through the lottery) right, and the way, we have a waiting list but they were way down the waiting list. I said, that's—we've never gone that far before. He goes well I know that there's gotta be some way I can get my child in here, and I said—and this was a, coming from a private school, you know, come from Jones Academy, no sir. I said we're a public school, there's no way, this is it. He goes how much would it cost? I said it's not gonna cost you any, it's free. How much would it cost to get he in there? I said she ain't coming, I promise you, it's not happening, you know, it's that kind of thing. You know, parents, they're wanting what's best for their kids. You can't blame them for trying.

This story shows how school choice can be an incredibly unleveled playing field. Parents with money feel they can influence opportunities in a way poorer parents cannot. Fortunately, Matthew stuck to his principles and did not allow opportunities to be influenced by money.

While most of the discussion on leveling the playing field centered on the differences between traditional public schools and charter schools from a policy standpoint, another view on the topic was discussed by Phillip. For many years, Jones Academy was the only option available to parents in the area outside of Davis County Schools. The rise of charters has brought many new choices to the area that do not carry with them the cost of attendance associated with Jones Academy, which has had a tremendous impact on their enrollments. Phillip stated, "I can't compete with free. No matter what I say to you educationally, athletics, the environment, the setting, the, you know, I could promise that my teachers would stand on their heads every single day, I can't compete with free." This discussion with Phillip caused me to begin to question if charter schools were becoming the new private schools in this area? That topic will be discussed later in this chapter.

Student Movement

A new phenomenon has arisen as a direct result of the marketing efforts and competition between the choices in Davis County. Students are moving from school to school, many times during the same academic year. Having been at Jones Academy for ten years, Phillip can look at the calendar and tell you when the movement away from the public schools will begin:

> I inevitably can predict pretty closely the number of people that will come in right before Christmas, from the public schools, coming close to the end of the semester. They're gonna be gearing up towards exams after the semester and something's happened, something's going wrong, hasn't gone well. Two weeks after public school starts, inevitably we get phone calls here, right around grading time, somewhere right around, you know, that first interim report. The teacher's unfair, the teacher's too hard, the, you know, and so those predictions can be there

> and we're seeing more of it, and I think we all are seeing more. We're seeing more, the charter schools are seeing more, and they're seeing more draw from the public schools.

Robert also has parents who decided to leave Stevens Charter during the school year and later wanted to return. He explained the school's policy and practices the following way:

> Now, as a school, we've set a policy that there is no revolving door here. If you decide to leave you go, you can reapply, we've got a waiting list and things like that, but—so we don't deal with the question you had as much, I mean we had, we've had some people who have some big regrets and they come and they've gotten back in through the traditional waiting list, never in the middle of the year.

Robert did go on describe a different issue they have at Stevens Charter with students moving and returning. He has a very transient population of students. He stated they do their best to work with these parents to return to Stevens Charter and gave me the following example:

> Now, for transient families and things like that it's a little different and there's times when we'll sit and discuss with them and perhaps there are times when we've taken students back in for that. So a family who, you know, we had a family who ran to, who had to go to Georgia. A family member got sick and they decided, the mother decided she was gonna go there to be with the family and what not and then the student wanted to come back a year later and we did work with them.

Phillip and Robert both talked about their efforts to talk with parents about not changing their current schools, or making sure they were moving for the right reasons. In Phillip's case, he sees a lot of parents looking to come to Jones Academy after something

has happened at a traditional school to upset them. He talks with the parents before they enroll, and in some cases, suggests they not become a part of the school. He said:

> There are times where I have conversations with parents and I honesty tell them, this isn't the time for your child to come here, you're making a reaction right now and I think it would have a negative impact on your child if your child came here right now. And they get a little angry that I don't want their child and they go on huffing and puffing and they probably go to one of the other ones.

Robert attributes a low student attrition rate to the conversations they have with parents who are considering leaving. He said,

> When we do an exit meeting or when a parent's thinking about pulling out, one, we do everything we can to encourage them to stay here and help them see the bigger picture and two, we also inform them that should they leave this would happen.

Alex and Matthew both described the student population at Davis High and Davis Early College as stable. Typically, parents have already made their school choice decision before their students reach the high school level. Alex does, however, see some students coming back. He stated, "I do see an increasing percentage of children coming back from those, but it's usually a one-way trip. They're not going to be flip-flopping. They're here. They leave before they get to me, but then they come back." In other words, once students arrive at Davis High, they typically stay there. Matthew also shared that his student population was, "Pretty stable once they get here." Considering that Davis High and Davis Early College are both high schools and they feel their populations are pretty stable once they arrive, this shows that Davis County parents are making the majority of their school choice decisions while their students are in grades K-8.

Regardless of the reason, the constant movement of students from one setting to another, many times during the same academic year, can be very harmful to the student's education. Phillip summed it up by saying, "They're the ones that are gonna suffer because they're gonna keep making those moves, they're not grounded in anything."

Private School Struggles in a Rural Environment

As I interviewed the administrative participants, it became clear schools that were popular and had no problems with enrollment viewed competition in a positive way. Those who were struggling to grow enrollments saw it in a different way. From my conversation with Phillip, he made a point to tell me with the increased choices in Davis County, coupled with a shrinking population of parents who could afford the school's tuition, Jones Academy is fighting for its very existence. Phillip explained the school enrollment history the following way:

> When I got here we, there were, the following year there were 350 contracts. That first year we opened, we opened with 400 students, we were able to pick up about, you know, 60 students that year. The following year, I got here in 2006, seven, eight, we got up to 425, we were pushing 430, then the economy tanked and so now we're down to 300 students and it, it really has been a, an economic issue for us.

This decline in enrollment also coincided with the opening of charter schools in Davis County, of which there are now two. In talking with Phillip, he does not see a turnaround coming in the near future:

> Right now, in and of itself, Jones Academy is putting itself out of business. I am educating a generation of students who are going off to college, who are going to gain an education in an attempt to seek a job that will provide them with a standard of living based on a socioeconomic standard. They are not coming back

> here; they are not backfilling a population of professionals in this area that are seeking a private education that they paid for. They're gonna stay somewhat local because their parents are probably here, their grandparents are here, they're gonna stay in (other area cities), they're gonna, they're not coming back here, they're not entering into the corporate world here, they're not opening businesses here, and they're not having children here . . . The base of individuals who are going to be able to afford a private education is going to disappear. I mean I even have parents who tell me as soon as their kids are gone, as soon as their kids are settled, they want to leave, and that's difficult, you know, it's hard to hear and people don't look at it on the backside and I've tried to voice the alarm of we're putting ourselves out of business.

Phillip has warned his governing board of this situation, and they tried to make a major change in order to survive, "We attempted to apply for a charter, to convert and saw that as a viable option for the survival of the school." Their charter school application was denied. These enrollment and financial struggles shared by Phillip further explain the school's efforts to raise funds and offer reduced tuition/waived enrollment fees that were discussed earlier in this chapter. Given the rise of charter schools in rural counties, and many of these same counties struggling to attract businesses and improve their economy, the question can be asked; Are charter schools becoming the new private schools? This would be an interesting topic for future studies on school choice.

Summary

Chapter V revealed what steps administrators take to shape a parent's school choice decision. The chapter first explains specifically how schools in Davis County market themselves. While there are many marketing strategies available to these schools, face-to-face communication is still the primary method employed by these administrators. This communication typically happens when parents visit the school, but

the administrators also realize they can be called upon to talk about their schools while they are in the checkout line of the grocery store. Additionally, students are often used for the purposes of marketing both on and outside of campus. Many administrators use student ambassadors when parents or other groups of people visit their campuses. Students also represent their school when they are at band performances, volunteering, or a number of other events. Any time any of these people are out in public, they are representing their school, and potential parents use these opportunities to imagine their student becoming, or not becoming, a product of that school's environment.

While face-to-face communication reigns supreme in Davis County, all of the schools have some form of digital presence they use to market themselves. Some individual schools are in the early stages of embracing these tools, while the central office leadership of Davis County Schools employs advanced techniques like Twitter chats to engage parents. In some cases, the digital presence hinders the schools, especially in terms of the schools that do not have very diverse student populations. The images on their sites could tell potential parents that this school is not for them. In this sense, digital media can be both a great marketing tool and a liability.

All of the marketing occurring in Davis County is a direct result of the administrator participants' feeling about competition in the area. Those schools that are thriving and not having enrollment issues felt competition was a good thing, while schools struggling with enrollment felt differently. The public school leaders felt as if the playing field was not level in regards to charter schools and their increased flexibility provided to them by the state. They do not have the same rules to follow in terms of

student population, staffing requirements, free and reduced lunch, and transportation. The public school leaders felt that if they were allowed to operate with the same flexibility as the charter schools they would be high competitive and just as desirable. Robert at Stevens Charter saw leveling the playing field in a different light. His school focuses on students of poverty, who in his view have not had options other than the traditional public school setting until his school opened.

An unintended consequence of the marketing and competition has been the constant movement of students from one school setting to another, often times within the same academic year. If a parent becomes upset at one school, they feel it is very easy and convenient to move their children to a different option. This could lead to detrimental results for the children who are not allowed to stay in a single setting for any period of time.

A final element revealed in this chapter is the plight of Jones Academy. While the school has a storied history of serving the families of Davis County, the school has seen a steady decline in its enrollment numbers, which coincides with a struggling economy and the opening of charter schools in the area. By Phillip's own admission, the school is, "Putting itself out of business." There are fewer and fewer families in the community who are willing, or have the means to pay the tuition and fees Jones Academy charges for enrollment. With the opening of area charter schools, many of the parents who might have paid to send their children to Jones Academy are now opting for a free option. This has forced the school to look at ways to compete and survive, such as applying for charter school status and offering discounts for new enrollments. At least in

Davis County, it appears as if charter schools are becoming the new private schools in rural North Carolina.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, CONCLUSION, AND REFLECTIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine what factors influenced rural parents who have taken part in the school choice process and how school administrators attempt to influence their choices. To determine these factors, qualitative research techniques were used. Interviews were conducted with parents who had chosen to place their children in a traditional public school, magnet school, charter school, or private school. Two parents who chose to home school their children were also included in this study. In addition to the parent participants, school and school system administrators were interviewed as a part of this research. This was done in an effort to understand how these administrators worked to shape a parent's school choice decision through various marketing techniques. A final piece of this study included an analysis of the emerging digital media used by the schools to assist with their marketing efforts in order to compete against other choice options in the area. Findings were reported in Chapters IV and V as various concepts emerged from the parent and administrator participants.

This chapter will revisit the theoretical framework and discuss how each of the study's research questions was answered. Recommendations for rural parents who are considering taking part in the school choice process will be made as well as for rural school administrators who assist parents in making those decisions. In addition,

recommendations for future research based on this study's findings will be discussed. The chapter will conclude with my personal reflections and conclusions about this study.

Revisiting the Theoretical Framework

As a reminder, the theoretical framework used for this study was a decision tree based off of the philosophy of decision theory (Hansson, 1994). A decision tree is a visual representation of a particular decision problem. There are four parts to a decision tree: acts, events, outcomes, and payoffs (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville website, n.d., para. 1). In the decision tree below, the act is the parental decision to consider different school options. The events are the factors and experiences affecting the decision-making process, including the schools' efforts to shape the decision. Outcomes are the results of the decision. In this model, the outcomes are the choice of a particular type of school. The payoff is the participation in the school choice process. Payoffs can be positive or negative, which in this study would be the satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the selection of school.

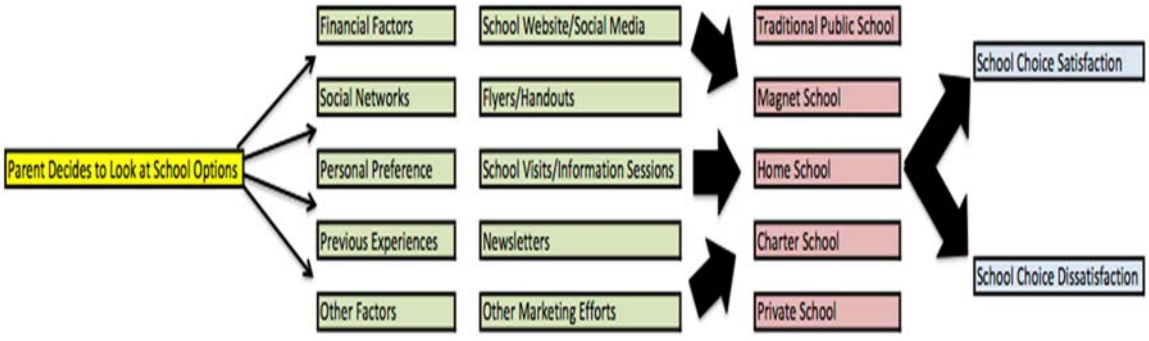

Figure 3. Decision Tree Revisited.

This study's primary focus was on the events section of the decision tree. This section is composed of the factors that impacted the school choice decision, including what drove the parent to make a decision, what factors impacted the choice set, and how the school administrator worked to influence that decision. In reviewing the research data, I was able to follow each parent participant's particular "path" through the decision tree as well as see what administrator efforts to shape that decision were the most effective. Table 3 outlines each parent's path to a school choice decision.

Table 4

Individual Parent Decision Trees

Parent	Events	Outcomes	Payoffs
Bridget	Personal Preference, Student Voice, Program Offerings Social Networks	Davis High	Dissatisfaction
Linda	Student Voice	Davis High	Dissatisfaction
David	Previous Experience, Program Offerings, Social Networks, Student Voice	Davis Early College	Satisfaction
Stephanie	Previous Experience, School Visits, Program Offerings, Cost	Davis Early College	Satisfaction
Dawn	Previous Experience, School Visits, Program Offerings, Social Networks, Transportation	Jones Academy	Inconclusive
Debra	Previous Experience, School Visits, Social Networks, Student Voice	Jones Academy	Satisfaction

Table 4

Cont.

Parent	Events	Outcomes	Payoffs
Stacy	Previous Experience, School Visits	Stevens Charter	Satisfaction
Tiffany	Previous Experience, School Visits, Social Networks, Student Voice, Cost	Stevens Charter	Satisfaction
Ann	Previous Experience, Social Networks, Student Voice	Home School	Satisfaction
Jessica	Previous Experience, Cost, Social Networks, Student Voice	Home School	Inconclusive

In looking at the individual decision trees, it becomes clear that in most cases, parents in this study had to weigh several different factors before making a school choice decision. Linda is the only parent who relied heavily on just one factor, which was her daughter's voice, in making a decision. With her younger son, she has already stated, "I'm probably going to visit quite a few of them (school choices) and see exactly what they have to offer" based on her experiences at Davis High. For her son, her decision tree will look differently from the one created for her daughter.

In analyzing the individual decision trees, there are some trends that appear. The first event listed for parents are the primary factors that drove them to make a school choice decision. This includes the two parents, Bridget and Linda, who chose to keep their children in the traditional public school setting. Even though they did not move their children, they still made a school choice decision based off of certain factors. The

eight parents who chose to begin choice work and moved their children to choice options all shared there was a negative previous experience that occurred with their children while they were in the traditional public school system that acted as a catalyst to start the school choice process. This previous experience, whether it was an issue with class size, safety, personnel, or academics made the parents believe that there was a better school option available in Davis County that would meet their needs and provide a better educational environment for their children.

The remaining elements listed in the events section of the decision tree are the factors that influenced each parent's school choice decision. This is where the parents conducted choice work to determine if a certain school would be a good choice for their children. When looking at the choice work conducted by these parents, a second trend emerges. The majority of the parents who chose a different school for their children made visits to the school they were considering. Even parents who eventually did not choose a school, like Linda, who kept her child at Davis High, and Jessica, who home schools her daughter, made visits to schools before deciding against sending their children to that particular option. The parents took tours and spoke with teachers and administrators. This is where the administrators primarily focused their marketing efforts. They felt like being able to talk to parents, or have them see their students in action, was there best way to "sell" their school.

A third trend that appeared in the data was that a majority of the parents in this study utilized their social networks to make a decision. They spoke to friends, neighbors, family members, or members of their church to learn more about the schools they were

considering. For the home school parents, there are many online communities to assist with the home school process and many co-op opportunities to network with other students and parents. While most parents received positive feedback from their social networks, Bridget did not, and this caused her to not choose Davis Early College for her daughter. While Linda did not utilize social networks when she considered schools for her daughter, she now plans to share her experiences at Davis High with members of her current social network in order to ensure they look at all options available to them.

A fourth and final trend in the data that emerged was that many parents relied heavily on their student's voice in order to make a school choice decision, or to keep them in their current school placement. While factors like academics and environment are important to parents, ultimately many of them wanted to make sure their students were comfortable in their current setting. This further demonstrates how emotional the school choice process can be.

Based on the findings in this study, I disagree with the ideas found in Rational Choice Theory, which would suggest that parents would choose a school solely on academics. I agree with Cucchiara and Horvat (2014) when they state, "School choice is a social process heavily weighted with meanings for its participants and frequently characterized by tensions and negotiations between competing goals, academic and otherwise" (p. 486).

While I did not discuss the satisfaction of individual parents' school choice decisions in detail in Chapter IV, the participants did indicate during the interviews if they were satisfied with their school and if they were planning to look at other options

again in the future. From the data previously shared, both Bridget and Linda regret sending their children to Davis High as they had negative experiences with the school, whether it was issues with teacher turnover, discipline, or the lack of program offerings. For two parents, Dawn and Jessica, I determined that their satisfaction level was inconclusive. While they both seemed happy with their choices, both indicated they might still look at other options. Dawn really wants her son to have access to a quality band program, so she was considering an area charter school. In discussing if she plans to continue to home school her children, Jessica stated, "We're still year-to-year. Yeah, in fact, I don't know that this is not the last year, it may be, it may not be. I am a hundred percent flexible." Overall, six of the eight parent participants who chose an option outside of the traditional school setting were completely satisfied with their school choice decision. This does not come as a surprise, as Botti and Iyengar (2006) state, "Choice enhances perceptions of self-determination and intrinsic motivation, which in turn have been associated with desirable consequences, such as greater satisfaction with the task and the decision outcome and more positive affect" (p. 25). Now that each parent's individual decision tree has been revealed, the study's research questions can be answered.

Answering the Research Questions

Research Question 1

What factors influence rural parents when they make school choice decisions?

The primary factor that influenced the parent participants in this study was their children's previous experience with the traditional public school system. Nine of the ten

parent participants originally placed their children in a traditional school within Davis County Schools before starting the school choice process. Only two of the ten parents interviewed kept their children in a traditional school by the time they reached high school, and both of those parents did look at other options before deciding to keep them at Davis High. The eight parents who did choose to leave the traditional public school setting all described at least one negative experience while their children were in public school that led them to look at other options.

In looking at the responses parents gave to this question, these previous experiences can be divided into three areas: School Environment, Personnel Issues, and Academics. The environmental factors primarily revolved around class size and safety/discipline concerns. Looking at the schools these parents chose, they typically have a smaller average class size than the traditional school setting. Additionally, the buildings themselves these choices are housed in are physically smaller than Davis High, giving them the appearance of smaller, more close-knit environment. Linda described Davis High as "chaotic." Several other parents sited concerns over bullying, drugs, safety in bathrooms, and various other reasons as to why they opted for a different school.

In looking at the personnel concerns described by the participants, most of discussion revolved around teacher turnover. In some cases, substitutes were in classes on a long-term basis because there was no teacher for the class. Others discussed a number of teachers leaving every summer, which led to concerns about consistency and

expectations. A few parents discussed the actual behavior of the teacher as reason for changing schools.

The academic concerns shared by parents dealt with issues such as the lack of offerings for AIG students, especially as the children move from elementary school to middle and high school. Parents were concerned their children would not be challenged academically as they matriculated through school. Other parents shared their dissatisfaction with the Common Core Curriculum as a reason for moving their children to private schools and home schools. Finally, many parents felt the district poorly implemented a new STEM middle school, which led them to lose faith in the direction the system was heading.

Looking at all of the previous experiences mentioned by parents, there is an overall belief that the quality of schooling in the traditional schools in Davis County is sub-standard. In all cases, parents told at least one negative story about the school system, and that experience triggered parents to enter the "act" stage of the decision tree. If parents had not had these negative experiences with the school system, there is a good chance they would have kept their children enrolled in its schools and not begun choice work.

Research Question 2

What do parents do to create their choice set?

In order for parents to create their choice set, they must first engage in choice work. This is the process where parents conduct research about their school options to determine if a particular school will be identified as a viable option for their children.

While there are electronic resources available to assist with the process, the parents in this study preferred to make personal visits to the school. This not only allowed them to see the campus, but it allowed parents the opportunity to talk with teachers and administrators and to have any questions they had to be answered. At Stevens Charter, the administration there takes an extra step and completes home visits with every student who is accepted through their lottery process. The parents relied heavily on this face-to-face communication to determine if a particular school would be included in their choice set.

While the parents were visiting these schools, they spent a great deal of time learning about what programs the schools could offer them. In most cases, parents were looking for programs that would ensure their children were prepared for college. The Early College offers the potential of up to two years of college credit for students before they graduate from high school. Both Jones Academy and Stevens Charter market themselves as having a college-prep environment. While most parents chose other school options for their children based on what they offered, Bridget and Linda opted not to send their children to Early College because of the things those schools did not have, like band programs or some of the traditional high school experiences, such as sports.

A final resource parents used when conducting their choice work was their social networks. They talked to friends, neighbors, and family members who have already made the school choice decision they themselves are considering. Having a close connection to these people brings with it a sense of trust and can aid in the final decision making process. Once parents have been through the school choice process, they then

become parts of social networks for other parents who are also considering different options for their children. In most cases, the experience was positive and the parents encouraged other parents to make the same decision they made. In Linda's case, her negative experience at Davis High with her daughter has motivated her to advise parents to look at other options and to not include the school in their choice set. In Bridget's case, social networks provided undue negative pressure for her not to send her child to Early College. In this study, social networks worked both for and against the parents.

Once parents have conducted their choice work, they must look at all the mitigating factors to determine if a particular school will be included in their choice set. Surprisingly in many cases students had a voice in their school placement. Parents valued the input gained from their children in terms of both their initial placement in a school as well as their continued placement. Other factors, such as cost of tuition or transportation issues, went a long way in many parents' opinions to exclude a particular school from their choice set. This was especially impactful on Jones Academy, as many parents mentioned the cost of attendance automatically excluded the school from consideration.

The choice work done by these parents in order to create their choice set is in direct contrast with rational choice theory. It states, "Parents have incentives to invest in their children for much the same reason as they invest in other durable goods" (Bast & Walberg, 2004, p. 433). The research data in this study shows that the school choice process is much more complicated. There is a lot of emotion involved in this process, as evidenced by the negative experiences that caused the process to start for these parents.

If parents truly looked at their children as durable goods they would not bother to listen to them when they are considering school options. The choice work conducted by these parents took a great deal of time and effort. If parents were truly using rational choice theory to make these decisions, the process would not be as involved and time-consuming.

Research Question 3

What do school officials in rural public, magnet, charter, and private schools do to inform the choices of parents?

Since school visits were the preferred method of conducting choice work by parents, it comes as no surprise that face-to-face communication between administrators and parents was the most effective method to inform parents. Administrators discussed the notion that they are always representing their school, even when they are not at work. If a parent recognizes them in the grocery store they can be called upon to talk about their school. This means the administrator must always be prepared with key talking points to share with potential parents. Alex talks about the overall college success rates of his students versus students at Jones Academy. Other administrators focused more on the positive aspects of their school without comparing themselves to others.

Another form of marketing that has proven to be quite impactful is the use of student ambassadors. Just like the administrators, students are called upon to represent their school, and this representation occurs both on and off campus. Parents see these students performing community service, at band concerts, sporting events, or they see

them performing in the classroom environment and envision their children reaching the same level of success if they enroll them in this particular school.

A final form of school marketing that is in its infancy in Davis County is digital media, which includes websites, social media accounts, and other documents. A review of these resources was conducted. These resources shed some light into why parents are choosing, or not choosing, certain schools. While most information found in the digital media was positive and supported the school's mission, factors that may drive a parent away from a particular school were also discovered. A lack of diversity in schools like Jones Academy and Stevens Charter was only made more obvious by the pictures located on their websites and social media accounts. The complicated enrollment application found on the Davis Early College website shed some light on why some students may not apply. Additionally, the constant fundraising efforts found on the Jones Academy Facebook page coupled with their efforts to encourage new enrollments with reduced deposits and waived application fees further highlighted Phillip's discussion of the school's financial issues. A parent's knowledge of these financial issues may lead them to exclude this school from their choice set even if they could afford the cost of attendance.

The rise of school choice in Davis County has caused administrators to now focus on the marketing of their schools. Principals are now promoters. They have to be aware that they and their students are always representing their schools. This pressure to promote and compete for enrollments has caused the role of administrator to drastically

change. No longer can principals solely focus on student and staff success. They must always be aware of how their school is perceived by the public.

Research Question 4

How could the context be shaped to make it more informative and inclusive for parents?

As I thought about this research question, I was immediately drawn to the administrator participants' discussion of competition and the need to level the playing field. A great deal of animosity exists between the public school system and the charter schools due to the fact that Stevens Charter, and all charters across the state, have much more flexibility in terms of certification requirements, enrollment processes, etc. The public school systems does not see that charter schools as being available to all children, that they must take every student who walks through the door and charters do not.

I also thought about Matthew's statement, "Stevens Charter makes it harder to apply here because they don't—they tell their teachers not to do recommendations." Phillip even mentioned with the growth of charter schools in the area there was a greater competitiveness among the school options. Robert sees the mission of Stevens Charter to provide a quality option for disadvantaged families who typically have not had other options while admitting he understands why other schools would want his autonomy.

To answer this research question, based on the data from these interviews, I would say the playing field does indeed need to be leveled among the school options to some extent, especially in the area of hiring and retaining staff. If greater autonomy is beneficial to charter schools, and private schools as well, public schools would benefit from these policies too. Working in another rural system, I understand how hard it is to

find and keep quality certified teachers. Providing the flexibility granted to charters would greatly help Davis County Schools with their teacher turnover issue. As Teresa, assistant superintendent for Davis County Schools stated, "Some real great teachers had certification issues . . . I just know some of the charters around here, the people in those charters or running those charters used to be employed with our school system." If the school system had greater flexibility to work with teachers on their certification issues, perhaps they would still be employed there.

The ultimate answer to this research question comes from the concept of competition itself. From the interviews with these administrators, I felt as if there was too much emphasis on competition and it was driving all of these marketing efforts. There was very little to no discussion with these administrators regarding the quality of what they provide to families that wasn't in comparison to another school. If all schools focused on the quality of their program and less on competition, that alone would make school choice in Davis County more inclusive and informative for parents, and you would not see the amount of student movement within a school year that currently exists. Ultimately, school choice for administrators boils down to enrollments, and enrollments equal dollars. Sadly, it appears the focus has shifted to the enrollments and the dollars that come with them and away from the students themselves. Every second an administrator is focused on competing for enrollments is a second not focused on student success.

School Choice Environment

Growing up as a student in a rural North Carolina public school system in the 1980s and early 1990s, there were no options for schooling other than the traditional public schools. The county I lived in did not have a private school within its borders, I did not know of anyone who was home schooling their children, and charter schools did not yet exist. Over the last 20-plus years, the concept of schooling has drastically changed in this state. Today, we operate with educational policies that encourage school choice, which has influenced parental and school district behavior and created what could be described as a "school choice environment" in North Carolina that is not isolated to large urban areas. These policies claim to provide choices for all families, but that is not the reality. Some choices are still out of reach for those who cannot afford tuition, rely on bus transportation, and free/reduced lunches. Schools set up with out these services exclude a number of poor families who do not have the means to supplement where these schools fall short. Despite these shortcomings, several rural counties, like Davis County, offer the full spectrum of school choices to parents despite a very limited amount of resources.

In North Carolina, traditional public schools, private schools, and home schooling have been the norm for decades. The creation of today's school choice environment began when the first charter school laws were approved in 1996 (Stoops, 2010). While growth was limited in the beginning by policy, caps on the number of charter schools and how fast they could grow were removed in 2011 (Stoops, 2010). In 2015, charter schools were further expanded in this state when two virtual charters began operation (Bonner,

2015). As a way to compete with charter schools, many school systems implemented magnet schools to attract students from across attendance zones (Chen, 2015). Magnet schools typically offer some form of specialized instruction like that of the Early Colleges.

As a result of this choice environment, and parents having many options at their disposal, schools have been forced to enter a marketplace where they constantly have to promote their school in order to compete against other school options for student enrollments, and the dollars that follow these students. In addition to promoting their school at public events or outings, school leaders have begun to embrace the available digital media, such as their school webpages and social media accounts, in an effort to make sure their "brand" is one that parents will want to consume. This has forced the role of the school administrator to change to one that focuses on public opinion in addition to all of the student/staff/parent support roles that are expected.

Davis County, with only 44,000 total residents according to the 2013 census, is home to a public school system with 6,500 students. These students attend ten elementary schools, two middle schools, and four high schools, including one Early College High School. There are also various academic academies housed on traditional high school campuses for parents to choose from. While the Early College has been in existence for about ten years, these new academies on the high school campuses have only come into existence after the rise of charter schools in the area. Additionally, the school system created a STEM middle school on the campus of Davis High in the last few years as well. These were created in order to compete with charters and private

schools in the area by providing different options for parents. The county is also home to two charter schools with a combined enrollment of 1,100 students, and two private schools. Jones Academy has an enrollment of approximately 300 students. The other private school in Davis County has approximately 240 students enrolled. Suffice it to say, there is a strong school choice environment in Davis County. With all of these choices available to parents, choice work now requires a more complex decision process than it did when I was a child. It requires more time and more parental legwork. In some cases, choice work is ongoing as parents move from one option to the next. Reviewing the individual parent decision trees shows just how many factors parents weigh going through this process and their overall feeling about the choice they made.

Looking at the school choice environment in Davis County through a social justice lens, there are questions that still need to be answered. If school choice is about choices for all families, then the current model here does not work. The school choice environment in this county is one that is still quite segregated, especially once you leave the public school setting. It has been well documented that Jones Academy is primarily composed of all Caucasian students. The first charter school in this county, which did not participate in this study, is 85% Caucasian. Robert started Stevens Charter to give minority and poor students a choice in Davis County that was previously not there for them, and they are 95% students of color. This choice is really only available to these targeted students since Stevens participate in the free lunch program and provides busing. There are clearly schools in this county that are just for Caucasian students and another for African-American students. This is not representative of the world we live in today,

and brings up equity issues in choice. While state policy says charter schools should attempt to mirror the demographics of the county in which they reside, this does not happen in Davis County. School choice still has a way to go to truly be an option for all students.

In looking at my research questions, it seems as if the parent and administrator participants in this study fit into pre-determined roles that have been created as a result of this choice environment. The role of the parent in this environment is to begin choice work once they have a negative experience with their child's current school choice placement. In some cases, such as Ann's, the experience was extreme in regards to bullying and discipline. This directly related to concerns about her children's safety. In most other cases, the issue was not that extreme. For example, some parents did not like the Common Core curriculum. Others simply wanted a smaller environment. Regardless, the experience caused the parent to begin choice work. This work involves visiting schools, talking to staff and members of their social network, and analyzing various factors in order to make a school choice decision. The role of the administrator is to provide these different options to parents and to continually focus on promoting their school in order to compete for enrollments. Administrators must constantly be mindful of how their school is perceived within various social networks and must work hard to maintain or change these perceptions in order to remain a viable option for parents. Public schools no longer have the monopoly on educating students in rural areas like Davis County, and it has changed the role of the principal forever.

Policy introduced over the last 20 years has created the existence of the school choice environment we live in today. Long gone are the days when traditional public schools were the expected home to the majority of students, with some students being enrolled in private schools, and an extreme minority of parents home schooled their children. Today, we live in an era where even small rural counties like Davis County offer multiple charter schools, private schools, and magnet schools as viable options for parents. This has greatly changed what it means to be an administrator as well as a parent in this new choice environment. In both roles, people are aware that there are multiple options for schooling, with many of them costing nothing. This has created a competitive market where everyone vies for enrollments on a daily basis.

Recommendations for Parents

The primary recommendation I have for parents would be to avoid the continuous moving of their children from school choice to school choice, as described in Chapter V. Phillip, headmaster at Jones Academy mentioned, "I inevitably can predict pretty closely the number of people that will come in right before Christmas, from the public schools, coming close to the end of the semester." Dawn, who has already moved her son from the traditional school setting to Jones Academy, is now considering yet another move to an area charter school. Jessica, who moved her daughter from the traditional setting to home school her, has mentioned they could consider other options at any time. This constant moving could lead to many negative consequences for their children. Mack (2010), quoting a study from the Journal of the American Medical Association, stated, "Children who move frequently are 35 percent more likely to fail a grade and 77 percent

more likely to have behavioral problems than those whose families stay in one place" (para. 6). Given this information, a second recommendation to parents would be to thoroughly conduct their choice work before choosing a different school, and they should do so with the intent that whichever school they choose for their children, it will be the last. Furthermore, if a problem arises at the school, parents should take an approach that they will work with the administration and staff in an effort to keep their children at the school, and their first notion should not be to move the child to another school. We all face challenges in several settings from time to time. We cannot teach our children that our first inclination should be to move away from the problem. We should teach them to be solution-oriented.

A final recommendation for parents would be to include their children in the school choice process. I was surprised how often parent participants in this study talked about how important their children's voices were in the selection of a school. The topic of student voice did not come up as part of my review of the current literature on school choice, but it makes sense to me personally having previously been the principal of an Early College High School. Many times I saw situations where students were forced by their parents to come to my school despite their wish to be at another location. In most cases, the student wasn't successful at my school and eventually left to go to the school s/he originally wanted. I am a personal believer that students who are happy with their school placement will be more successful.

Recommendations for Administrators

My first recommendation to administrators comes directly from a portion of my answer to Research Question 4, which is to not focus so much on competition. Instead, more emphasis should be placed on collaboration like the SKY partnership discussed in Chapter 2. President Obama in Russell (2016) stated that charter schools, "Offer lessons that can be applied in other institutions of learning across our country, including in traditional public schools" (para. 2). The problem is, in many cases, schools are not partnering to learn those lessons. Instead, schools are driven by enrollments. Enrollments equal dollars. This has led to competition rather than collaboration. Whether the playing field is even or not in terms of policy, all the schools in my study want to do the best they can for their students. No one has all the answers, and all of the schools are doing good things for their children. However, no one knows what the other school is doing to be successful. Matthew, principal of Davis Early College, made this very suggestion during our interview when he stated,

> Why don't we have a meeting where all the schools are involved, you know, every school and somebody that represents home school, you know, so we could all say okay, here's what we add to this piece of pie, you know, what's the best for what. Maybe even we could recommend some people to charter if they're not; maybe they're not good public school people. Maybe they'd be better at the charter, you know, and—or maybe they'd be better at the private school. Is there any way that could happen?

A second recommendation, which is specifically for tradition public school administrators, is to focus on the school environment. In looking at my research, the parent participants discussed how they left the traditional setting over environmental

issues, primarily around class size, for a smaller, more close-knit environment. Knowing this, I would recommend these principals look for innovative ways to provide the feeling of a smaller environment in this larger setting. This could come from the installation of various academic academies or other groupings to give a smaller feel. As a word of caution, I would recommend that the implementation of any program be fully planned as to avoid the issues surrounding the STEM academy implementation discussed in Chapter IV.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study's findings identify the factors rural parents weigh when making a school choice decision, and the efforts of administrators to shape that decision, these findings are based on a small number of participants in one rural North Carolina county covering five school sites along with two parents who home school their children. I recommend more research of this kind be conducted in other rural areas to gain a more complete picture of the school choice environment in rural North Carolina. Conducting more of this type of research with many more participants in varying regions of the state will only assist in gaining that more complete picture.

A second recommendation for future research comes from my discovery of the plight of private school Jones Academy. The rise of more free options coupled with a struggling economy has pushed the school to the brink of closure in the near future. It would be interesting to see if this same scenario is playing out in other rural areas. A study of this nature would be led by the research question, "Are charter schools becoming the new private schools in rural North Carolina?"

Conclusion

As school choice has grown in popularity over the last several decades, research on how parents make a school choice decision has been conducted exclusively in large urban areas, such as Chicago, Milwaukee, and Washington, DC. The school choice movement has since spread to rural areas, like Davis County. To help address this gap in the school choice research, this study explored the factors rural parents weighed when making a school choice decision, and the efforts of school administrators to shape that choice. Parents told many stories about their experiences in the traditional public school setting that led to making a decision to search for other options. The administrators talked a great deal about how they compete against one another for enrollments and the dollars that come with them. Ultimately, the school choice process is a messy one, filled with emotions and decisions for parents to make. Furthermore, choice is driven by race in Davis County, as there several schools that are dominated by just one race, rather than having a diverse population of students. The feeling in this county is that some schools are just for certain families, so equity has not been achieved. What I learned is there is no one true best option for all parents, and they will always do what they feel is best for their children given their current circumstances. It is the role of the administrator to work with these parents through these circumstances to provide the best possible education for these children.

Reflections

This study was not designed to determine if we should have school choice or not. School choice is here to stay. The school choice environment in Davis County is a clear

indicator of that. Given this, I sought to learn more about why parents made different school decisions for their children. What I found, at times, was very difficult to write. Given that I have dedicated the last twenty-plus years of my life to public education in rural areas, it was hard to hear all of the negative experiences parents had had with public schools. As I completed each interview and wrote in my journal, I kept coming back to one idea, and that idea was that the rise of school choice is a direct result of our failings as public school leaders to address the needs of our families. This was a tough conclusion to come to.

After coming to that conclusion, I decided it was more important than ever to share this study with others. After all, the only way school administrators can improve their schools is to hear what parents say about them and to learn why they leave. When teachers resign, oftentimes we conduct exit interviews with them to find out why they have made that decision. We generally do not get that opportunity with parents, so I thought this study would serve in that function. Gaining specific insight into why parents leave us for other options gives us a chance to improve.

This research study has inspired me, now that I am back in to role of public school principal in a rural school district, to make sure I provide the type of school parents want to send their children to and to keep them there throughout my school's grade span. There are charter schools in the area, and in my previous role of Director of Magnet Programs, I worried about competing against these schools. No longer do I do that. Instead, I focus on what I can control, and that is supporting quality teachers and creating a learning environment where students can grow. I have even reached out to one

of the local charter schools and taken a tour of its facilities and chatted with their principal. I have taken some of their philosophies on education and added them to my own. It is my hope that through this study, all school leaders will grow and be better equipped to work with parents.

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APPENDIX A

PARENT INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Describe the school you would want your child to attend if given the option.
2. What are the critical factors of schooling you desire for your child?
3. What school options are available to you as a parent?
4. Tell me how you found out about the different choices available to you.
5. What research did you conduct on the schools you were considering?
6. What did the school do to help you make your decision?
7. What could the schools have done to provide you more information about themselves?
8. Did you consider any other options than the school you chose? If so, what were they?
9. Did anything keep you from considering any other options? If so, what were they?
10. Did you enroll your child in the school you considered "the best"? How do you define this?
11. If not, what kept you from enrolling them there?
12. What were the factors you considered in making your decision?
13. How important did transportation factor into your decision?
14. What were the things that were most attractive about the school you chose?
15. What were the least attractive characteristics about the schools you did not consider?
16. What previous experiences factored into your decision?
17. What role did the school's demographics play in your decision?

18. Describe your overall feeling about the choice you made.

19. If given the opportunity, would you make the same school decision?

20. If you could make one improvement to the school choice movement in rural North Carolina, what would it be?

APPENDIX B

ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What is school choice?
2. Describe for me your feelings on school choice?
3. Why do you think the school choice movement has become so popular in rural areas?
4. How did you engage parents in a dialogue to determine there was a need for choices?
5. What efforts has your school/school system made to market itself?
6. How do you determine the effectiveness of your marketing strategies?
7. How important are digital resources (website, social media) to your marketing strategies?
8. How do you insure all parents in your vicinity receive your message?
9. How successful have you been at recruiting and retaining students from all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds?
10. What type of transportation plan do you provide for families?
11. What do you see as the most important next step for your school/school system in regards to choice?
12. If you could make one improvement to the school choice movement in rural North Carolina, what would it be?