Stuck in School: How Social Context Shapes School Choice for Inner-City Students

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Background: *High school choice policies attempt to improve the educational outcomes of poor and minority students by allowing access to high school beyond neighborhood boundaries. These policies assume that given a choice, families will be able to select a school that supports their child's learning and promotes educational attainment. However, research on the effects of public school choice programs on the academic achievement of disadvantaged students is mixed, suggesting that families do not necessarily respond to these programs in ways that policymakers intend.*

Purpose: *The purpose of this article is to identify how family and neighborhood contexts interact with public school choice policies to shape the educational opportunities of inner-city students. Specifically, we ask: What criteria are used to choose schools? What are the implications of these school choice decisions for students' future educational and occupational opportunities?*

Research Design: *We use data from interviews and fieldwork conducted with 118 low-income African American youth ages 15–24 who attended Baltimore City Public Schools at some point during their high school career. Research on school choice tends to rely on data from parents, and we offer a unique contribution by asking youth themselves about their experiences with school choice.*

Conclusions: *Although school choice policies assume that parents will guide youths' decision about where to go to high school, the majority of youth in our sample were the primary decision makers in the high school choice process. Additionally, these youth made these choices under considerable constraints imposed by the district policy and by their family, peers, and academic background. As a result, the youth often selected a school within a very limited choice set and chose schools that did not necessarily maximize their educational opportunity. Our results demonstrate that school choice policies must take into account the social context in which educational decisions are made in order to maximize chances for students' individual academic achievement and to decrease inequality by race and social class.*

Studies consistently show that there are significant gaps between the academic achievement and educational attainment levels of poor and minority high school students and their more advantaged White peers (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Reardon, 2011). One potential reason for these achievement gaps is that in many school districts, students' high school assignment is determined by their home address. Because of persistent patterns of racial and income residential segregation, these school assignment patterns trap low-income Black and Latino high school students in low-performing and under-resourced schools (Orfield & Lee, 2005; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). High school choice policies such as those that authorize intra- and interdistrict open-enrollment systems, magnet school programs, charter school programs, and school voucher systems attempt to improve the outcomes of these at-risk students by allowing access to high schools outside their neighborhood. These policies assume that given a choice, families will be able to select a school that supports their child's learning and helps the child achieve his or her desired educational attainment (Levin, 1991). However, research assessing the effects of school choice programs on the academic achievement of disadvantaged students is mixed, suggesting that families are not always leveraging these policies in ways that policymakers intend (Cullen, Jacob, & Levitt, 2005; see for review Goldhaber, 1999; Loeb, Valant, & Kasman, 2011). To interpret how public school choice policies influence the educational careers of low-income students, we must understand the context in which these policies are being enacted and experienced by families and students. In this article, we analyze how family and neighborhood contexts interact with public school choice policies to shape the educational careers of inner-city students. More specifically, we ask: What criteria are used to choose schools? What are the implications of these school choice decisions for students' future educational and occupational opportunities?

To answer these questions, we rely on fieldwork and in-depth, semi-structured interviews that were conducted in 2010 with 118 youth whose household had participated in the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program in Baltimore. Much of the research on school choice relies on data from parents, and we offer a unique contribution by asking youth themselves about their experiences with school choice. We find that the way low-income families in our sample exercise school choice undermines assumptions about how these policies will work to improve youth outcomes. Although school choice policies assume that parents will guide youths' decision about where to go to high school, the majority of youth in our sample were the primary decision makers in the high school choice process. We also find that youth were making these choices under considerable constraints imposed by the district policy and by their family, peers,

and academic background. Because of the disadvantages that they faced during their elementary and middle school years, most of the youth in our sample were not eligible for the top high schools in the district and felt that they were choosing from among a small number of undesirable schools. When choosing among the nonselective schools available to them, youth did not prioritize school characteristics such as teacher quality or graduation rates—those that policymakers typically use to measure school quality. The youth either lacked information about these school characteristics or found it necessary to prioritize physical safety and social concerns over all else. As a result, youth selected a school within a very limited choice set and, as evidenced by their accounts of academic and postsecondary struggles, many chose schools that did not necessarily maximize their educational opportunity. These findings add to the school choice literature by showing how low-income youth, and less often, their families, make school choice decisions and describing why they make the choices they do. We argue that to maximize student achievement and to decrease inequality by race and social class, designers of school choice policies must ensure that there are an ample number of high-quality nonselective schools available for students to choose from, and must take into account the social processes that shape inner-city students' educational decisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research shows that schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods have fewer resources and that the quality of primary and secondary education varies drastically in the United States along racial lines (Briggs, 2005). A variety of policies have been implemented to address these inequalities, and school choice has been a primary policy tool. School choice policies are, in theory, designed to break the residential-school link and broaden the choice set for where children can attend school.

School choice policies vary widely across the country. Many school districts have magnet schools, which offer an alternative to the traditional neighborhood school in that all students within a school district can choose to apply regardless of how far they live from the school (Steel & Levine, 1994). Some magnet schools are specialized in terms of their course offerings or academic focus but do not have entry requirements, whereas others selectively screen applicants on the basis of their prior academic performance and/or special talent. Some states and school districts offer choice through school voucher programs, which provide students with public money to attend a non-public school (e.g. Witte, 2001). Other states and school districts have allowed charter schools to open, which provide families with free schooling options that are independently run and not necessarily located in their

neighborhood school zone (Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, Pathak, & Walters, 2010; Clark, Gleason, Tuttle, & Silverberg, 2011; Renzulli, 2005; Witte et al., 2007). Finally, some localities have implemented intra- and interdistrict open enrollment policies for their traditional neighborhood public schools (Bifulco, Cobb, & Bell, 2009; Frankenberg & DeBray, 2011; Smith, 1995).

School choice policies are typically intended to increase the opportunities for disadvantaged children to attend higher quality schools (Beal & Hendry, 2012). When students in low-income neighborhoods have a choice to attend a school in a different neighborhood, they will theoretically have access to higher quality or more developmentally appropriate schools, which could result in improved educational outcomes for these students. Advocates of school choice also suggest that these programs can improve school quality because of their competitive effect; traditional neighborhood schools no longer have a "captive audience" of families and should therefore be incentivized to improve their performance, lest their enrollments and funding drop (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Many studies consider the effectiveness of school choice policies in reducing school segregation and in increasing poor and minority students' access to higher quality schools. Although assessments of school choice policies vary in this regard, many studies suggest that they do little to reduce the problem of school segregation and may even increase segregation and further stratify resource distribution (Briggs, 2005; Lee, Croninger, & Smith, 1994; Saporito & Sahoni, 2006). There are racial and class disparities in both the availability of school choice and the likelihood of taking advantage of school choice policies (Teske & Schneider, 2001). Even with access to choice policies, research shows that children from poor families are less likely to attend high-quality schools than children from nonpoor families (Burgess & Briggs, 2010; Lauen, 2007).

Why are disadvantaged families less likely to participate in school choice policies that could improve their students' access to higher performing and more resourced schools? With one notable exception (i.e., Wells & Crain, 1999), most of the school choice literature that explores this question makes the assumption that it is the *parents* who are choosing schools for their children (Beal & Hendry, 2012; Bell, 2009; Neild, 2005; Schneider & Buckley, 2002). Studies on how parents make school choice decisions suggest that low-income parents face many constraints and that geography impacts the accessibility of school choice options for disadvantaged families (Rhodes & DeLuca, 2014). Lubienski, Gulosino, and Weitzel (2009) questioned the notion that school choice increases the access of poor and minority families to better schools; they found that new, resourced schools are not built in disadvantaged areas because they target affluent families. Bell (2009) found that parents vary in the extent to which they consider

proximity when choosing schools for their children, but that most take into consideration the geographical characteristics of schools. She noted that students who must travel long distances to school require access to transportation, and this can be a scarce resource for poor families.

One reason that low-income children have restricted access to better schools may be that their parents have limited access to information about school performance and school quality. Scholars have argued that improved access to information is one way to increase the effectiveness of school choice policies (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Levin, 2009; Neild, 2005; Schneider et al., 1998). Schneider et al. (1998) found that low-income parents have scarce information about test scores and other measures of school quality. Social networks often provide information about schools, and parens rely on their social ties to learn about high school options (Lacireno-Paquet & Brantley, 2008; Lareau, 2014). Through interviews with parents of eighth-grade students in the Philadelphia public school system, Neild (2005) found that the most socioeconomically disadvantaged parents did not have social networks that could connect them to important information about some of the high quality schools across the city. Additionally, low-income parents use various criteria to define what a "good" school is, and this sometimes includes nonacademic characteristics that may or may not be related to a school's academic quality, such as strong discipline policies and uniform requirements (DeLuca & Rosenblatt, 2010).

However, in poor families, parents do not necessarily make school decisions. The literature on family dynamics in low-income households suggests that in high-poverty contexts, young people often take on adult roles and make important decisions for the family. Poor youth are more likely than middle-class youth to be exposed to adult knowledge and assume responsibilities and decisions at an early age (Chase, Deming, & Wells, 1998; Dodson & Dickert, 2004; Jurkovic, 1997), a phenomenon sometimes referred to as "adultification" (Burton, 2007). Adultification happens for a variety of reasons but is most common in families that are economically disadvantaged; parents sometimes have to rely on their children to fulfill roles that society regards as parental responsibilities (Burton, 2007). Dodson and Dickert (2004) found that poor children, especially girls, engage in family labor such as childcare. Our sample consists of youth living in the kinds of disadvantaged families where children often take on consequential decisions and responsibilities.

Wells and Crain's (1999) study of the interdistrict school choice program in the St. Louis metropolitan area is one of the few studies that bring to light students' role in school choice. In their interviews, they spoke to African American parents *and* students about the high school choice process, focusing on whether they chose a school in the surrounding suburbs. Importantly, they found that there is variation in how involved parents

are in their children's school choices. The parents of the urban African American students who chose to leave the city for high school and attend school in one of St. Louis' suburbs were more highly educated and more involved in their children's schooling than the parents of children who stayed in the segregated St. Louis school system. In almost all cases, these "stayer" parents left the decision about whether to transfer to a suburban school up to their child, and some noted that they did not discuss the issue with their child. The authors attributed parents' willingness to leave the school choice decision-making process up to their children to the "powerlessness and alienation" that the parents felt from growing up and trying to get by in an inner-city neighborhood (Wells & Crain, 1999, p. 156).

In summary, school choice policies assume that given a choice about where to send their child to school, parents will select a school that maximizes their child's educational opportunity. Existing research on school choice has suggested that poor and minority families do not always respond to these options in the ways that policies intend. Most studies on the challenges that poor families with school choice policies have focused on parents' interactions with the process. This work suggests that parents in high-poverty contexts are unable to leverage the educational marketplace created by school choice policies as free agents, because the choices of low-income parents are limited by poor information and other resource constraints.

Our data allowed us to explore the school choice process, and we found that it is more complex than scholars and policymakers assume. We also analyzed the extent to which low-income urban youth engage in the high school choice decision-making process. Our qualitative data, which include information about youth's personal history, schooling experiences and transitions, family life, and neighborhood experiences, describe how the social and contextual factors in students' lives influence their schooling decisions. We also investigated *how* inner-city students are making their school choices, the criteria used in the decisions, and the implications of the decisions are for their future educational and occupational opportunities.

DATA AND METHODS

SAMPLE

The data used in this project were collected to understand the long-term outcomes for families and children who participated in the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) housing program. MTO was a housing mobility program that operated in Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, New York City, and Los Angeles between 1994 and 1998 (Orr et al., 2003). The program was designed as a random assignment experiment to assess whether giving low-income families living in public housing a housing voucher to move to a

low-poverty neighborhood would lead to improved social and economic outcomes for adults and children. Over the course of four years (1994–1998), 4,604 families volunteered for the program and were randomly assigned to one of three groups (Sanbonmatsu et al., 2011). The treatment group was given housing counseling and a voucher requiring that they move to a census tract with a poverty rate of no more than 10%. The Section 8 group was given a conventional housing voucher with no geographical restrictions, and the control group was not offered a housing voucher to move but was followed alongside the other groups (and might eventually have acquired housing assistance in the natural course of events). Survey researchers followed up with participants in 2001–2002 (Orr et al., 2003) and again in 2008–2010 (Sanbonmatsu et al., 2011) to conduct an interim and final impacts evaluation. In 2010, our research team interviewed a subsample of youth (ages 15–24) whose parent had participated in the MTO program in Baltimore City. A total of 200 youth from households in the MTO treatment and control groups were randomly selected to be interviewed, and the research team achieved a response rate of 75% (*N* = 150). The research team (of which all three authors were a part) conducted fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with respondents that lasted between 1.5 and 3 hours. Interviews focused on youths' experiences with residential mobility, school, peers, neighborhoods, and family. Although school choice was not the central focus of this study, all respondents were asked how they ended up in each high school that they attended and were asked about their experiences with these schools. More detail about the specific interview questions are provided in the technical appendix. Most of the respondents were still living in the Baltimore metropolitan area at the time that the research was conducted, and most interviews took place in respondents' homes. The names of program participants (as well as their school and family members' names) have been changed to protect their identity.

For the analyses in this article, we rely on the 118 interviews with youth who spent at least some of their high school career in Baltimore City Public Schools.[1] Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the full study sample and the analytic sample that we rely on for these analyses.

We note that there are few differences between our analytic sample and the full study sample. In our analytic sample, 40.7% were from families that were originally randomized into the treatment group and moved with their housing voucher to a lower poverty neighborhood (treatment compliers), 38.1% were from families that were originally randomized into the control group, and 21.2% were from families that were randomized to receive treatment but never used their MTO voucher to move to a low-poverty neighborhood (referred to as treatment noncompliers). The mean age of our analytic sample was 19.7, and close to half of our sample was male. All

Table 1. Description of Full Qualitative Sample and Analytic Subsample

	Full Qualitative Sample	Analytic Subsample
Experimental group (compliers)	44%	40.7%
Experimental group (non-compliers)	20.7%	21.2%
Control group	35.3%	38.1%
Mean age	19.6	19.7
Percent male	51%	49.2%
Number of youth respondents	150	118

Note: The analytic subsample includes all youth who indicated that they spent at least a portion of their high school career in Baltimore City Public Schools.

respondents were African American. Although the sample was collected as part of a randomized field trial to understand the effects of housing policy and neighborhoods on families in the inner city, our study does not employ an experimental analysis. Rather, we take advantage of the large number of youth in the study who experienced school choice.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

A team of four coders used Atlas.ti to conduct initial coding of the full interview transcripts.[2] Coders were instructed to capture a list of salient themes established in the interview guide. For this article, we primarily rely on data that were captured by the school change code during primary coding. This code includes any discussion of promotional (i.e., from elementary to middle school or middle school to high school) and non-promotional school changes (changes within the school year or between school years). We inductively coded this very general school change code to identify how the youth in our sample and their families were making choices about where they went to high school (Creswell, 2012). As recommended, this secondary coding process was iterative and involved all three of us coding and re-coding the data a number of times and searching for disconfirming cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After settling on what appeared to be the most important and common dimensions of the school choice process, we created a school choice profile for each respondent. This profile indicated the name and selectivity of each high school that the respondent attended, who made the school choice, and the top reasons given for why they selected each high school. More detail about our analytic strategy, the specific codes generated for this analysis, and examples of how raw data were coded are provided in the technical appendix.

<div align="center">THE BALTIMORE CITY POLICY CONTEXT[3]</div>

Youth in our sample began their high school careers sometime between 2000 and 2010. During this period, the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) was significantly expanding the high school options available to families. Figure 1 summarizes the most salient features of the school choice policy context and the changes that took place over this 10-year period.

We note that although the older youth in our sample had fewer choices than the younger sample members, all respondents who spent time in BCPSS experienced a school choice policy in some way or another. In the paragraphs that follow, we describe the school choice landscape in Baltimore City between 2000 and 2010.
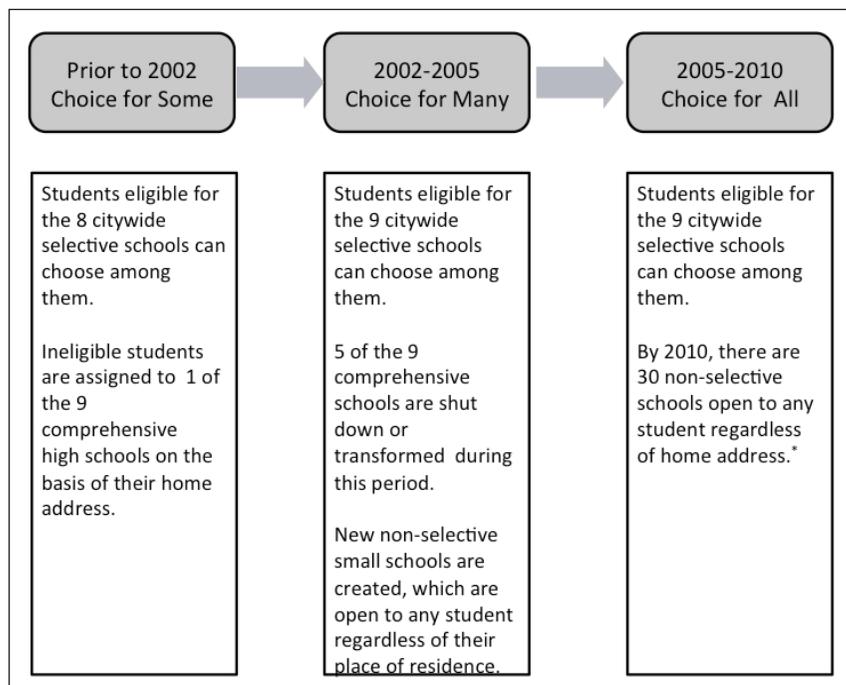
MAGNET SCHOOLS

Magnet school programs were the one constant feature of the school choice menu in Baltimore City between 2000 and 2010. Like many urban school districts, Baltimore City has for decades offered its most academically advanced students the choice to attend a selective "citywide" magnet program for high school (Baum, 2010). Eligibility for admission to seven of the nine magnet schools was determined by a composite score, which combines students' state standardized test scores from middle school with their middle school grades. The two that did not rely on the composite score had other entrance requirements; one of these schools is for artistically gifted students and requires an audition, and the other requires an in-person interview.

Over the 10-year period that our sample was entering high school, selective admission schools consistently served a large portion of the BCPSS high school student population (over 1/3 in 2010), making them a significant feature of the Baltimore City school marketplace and, as we will show in our findings, prominent in the minds of youth. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics from the 2010 Maryland School Report Card on the average percentage of low-income students attending the nine selective high schools and their average graduation rates. Given their selectivity, it is perhaps not surprising that in 2010, these schools tended to serve a more advantaged student population and had higher graduation rates than the nonselective schools.

CHOICE AMONG NONSELECTIVE SCHOOLS

For decades, students who did not qualify for or choose a selective high school were assigned to one of nine comprehensive high schools in the district. These assignments were primarily determined by students' home address. In an effort to improve the educational outcomes of students who

Figure 1. Changes to high school choice policy in Baltimore City between 2000 and 2010

Prior to 2002 Choice for Some	2002-2005 Choice for Many	2005-2010 Choice for All
Students eligible for the 8 citywide selective schools can choose among them.	Students eligible for the 9 citywide selective schools can choose among them.	Students eligible for the 9 citywide selective schools can choose among them.
Ineligible students are assigned to 1 of the 9 comprehensive high schools on the basis of their home address.	5 of the 9 comprehensive schools are shut down or transformed during this period. New non-selective small schools are created, which are open to any student regardless of their place of residence.	By 2010, there are 30 non-selective schools open to any student regardless of home address.[*]

[*] In addition to non-selective schools, Baltimore City has schools that serve students with needs that cannot be met in a traditional setting (students with special needs and students who are over-aged and under-credited). According to the Maryland School Report Card data, in 2010, there were nine alternative and special education schools.

Source: Maryland School Report Card (2010); MacIver & Dayton, 2008; Smerdon & Cohen, 2009.

did not qualify for the selective schools, Baltimore City initiated a "blue-print" for high school reform in 2001. The creation of new schools, the closure or restructuring of failing schools, and the expansion of choice were critical elements of this reform strategy (MacIver & Dayton, 2008; Smerdon & Cohen, 2009). Starting in 2002, the district began to break-down the five lowest performing comprehensive high schools into small-er academies, and worked in partnership with external organizations to create new nonselective small schools and charter high schools. Between 2002 and 2010, the number of high schools available to students who did not qualify for or chose not to attend a selective school increased from nine comprehensive high schools to a portfolio of 30 nonselective schools

Table 2. School Composition and Performance of Baltimore City Public High Schools in 2010, by School Type

	Nonselective High Schools	Selective High Schools
Number of schools	30	9
Mean % eligible for National School Lunch Program[*]	77.14%	66.17%
Mean school graduation rate[^]	68.45%	92.89%
Average school size	505.63	970.56
Total # of students enrolled	15,139	8,735

[*]% eligible for the National School Lunch program is missing for one nonselective school.

[^] Seven of the 30 nonselective schools did not report graduation rate data in 2010 because they were too new to have a graduating class by 2010.

Note: All data were obtained from publicly available data sets on the Maryland School Report Card website, which reports data at the school level. The statistics for school size, % eligible for the National School Lunch Program and the graduation rate were calculated by finding the unweighted mean of the data reported by each school in the two categories of selectivity. We have excluded the nine alternative schools from the analysis because five of them did not report graduation rate data. In 2010, a total of 2,034 students were enrolled in alternative schools in the district. They typically serve students with needs that cannot be met in a traditional public school.

(including the four of the nine remaining comprehensive high schools).[4] When a new school opened in the district, it had to be a "school of choice" and open to students regardless of where they lived. By 2005, all high schools (including the surviving comprehensive high schools) officially became schools of choice (Smerdon & Cohen, 2009). By the 2006–2007 school year, the district reported that 88.3% of their eighth-grade students participated in high school choice, and by the 2010–2011 school year, that number was up to 97.8% (Alonso, 2011).

FINDINGS

Our primary objective was to identify how family and neighborhood contexts interact with school choice policy to shape the educational opportunities of inner-city students. First, we describe what the school choice process looks like in these households and then discuss how those decisions

are shaped by the policy itself, and by students' family and neighborhood contexts. Finally, we consider how these choices impact youths' experiences in school.

HOW DO SCHOOL CHOICES GET MADE?

School choice policy advocates and the majority of studies evaluating these policies assume that parents decide where youth attend high school. However, we found instead that by and large, youth in our sample are making their own decisions about where to go to high school. Of the 118 youth in our analytic sample, 86 acknowledged that they had some level of choice in where to attend high school.[5] As shown in Table 3, of these 86 respondents, 66% ($n = 57$) indicated that they were the primary decision-making agents (14% reported making the decision alongside their parent). Only 10.5% ($n = 9$) of the youth reported that it was their parents who made the decision. Of the remaining students, 9.3% ($n = 8$) reported than another adult, such as a teacher, was primarily responsible for their high school selection.

Most respondents simply did not mention an adult in their decision-making process, although a few youth indicated that their parent explicitly empowered them to make the decision. Bernice went to Catholic school for middle school, but wanted to "venture out" for high school because she was tired of wearing uniforms at the parochial school. Although her parents did not agree with her decision, they let her try it anyway. She told us, "I think my Mom and Dad let me go just to get a feel like 'oh you see this is where you want to go' but no. So it was like pretty much letting me ramp on myself." Bernice became part of the "wrong crowd" at the public high school she chose to attend for ninth grade, and was suspended for fighting. Bernice's mother pulled her out of that school at the end of ninth grade to finish high school at Catholic school. Bernice felt fortunate that her parents stepped in when they did, explaining, "I learned my lesson."

Some respondents described the day in middle school when they made their school choice decision. Jaquan, 22, said he was "kind of surprised" on the day in eighth grade when he was told to pick his high school. He explained, "They had us all in the cafeteria one day, they gave us sheets and a list of schools and we just checked the schools we wanted to go to." Other students described filling out a survey in their middle school auditorium, and still others noted that they received a letter from the school district with a list of schools to choose among. Whether they were making their decision at home or in school, only a small minority of youth mentioned that an adult significantly contributed to the process. It is possible that youths' parents or teachers *were* involved and that our respondents simply chose not to mention adult involvement.[6] However, that our respondents

Table 3. Who Makes the School Choice Decision?

Youth	57
	66.3%
Parent and youth	12
	14%
Parent	9
	10.5%
Other adult	8
	9.3%
Total	86

Note: Of the 118 students in our analytic sample, 86 acknowledged that they had some degree of choice in where to attend high school. This table is based on data for those 86 cases.

overwhelmingly indicated that they were the primary decision maker signals that, at the very least, youth play a critical role in school choice, and that we need to better understand *how* they are making those decisions. In the following sections, we describe how inner-city youths' decisions are significantly shaped by their social environments, academic backgrounds, and the policies themselves.

WHAT CRITERIA DO INNER-CITY YOUTH USE TO MAKE SCHOOL CHOICE DECISIONS?

We found that family and neighborhood context loom large in understanding how children end up in the schools they do. For example, we found that youth did not typically make their decisions based on the objective criteria that many school choice policies assume, such as a school's academic record and extracurricular offerings. In this section, we first describe how youth interpreted their school choice options, and then discuss aspects of their social context that came up in the process of choosing a high school.

Students' Understanding of Choice: "Best Students"

The amount of choice that our respondents had was partially determined by when they entered high school (2000–2010). Between 2000 and 2005, a handful of nonselective schools could be considered "schools of choice," but by 2005, all high schools were officially schools of choice. Notably, however, youth of all ages perceived a stratified educational marketplace and felt that choices were limited if one did not qualify for the most selective schools in the city. For example, Bart, 21, explained the differences

between the top three most selective schools in the city, the lower ranked selective school that he attended, and all the rest:

> Armstrong High School [Bart's school] was the net to catch those that weren't, that didn't get enough good scores or grades to get into Roosevelt or Hayes but were better, were good enough to not go, to have to go to Jefferson or Cleveland, like all the bad, like the really bad ones.

Donte, 16, was one of the few students we spoke to who did attend one of three most selective schools in the city. He told us that these schools are quite desirable when compared with the other schools in the city because they have the "best students" and "they're really good at academics." Teachers and students go one on one for the best learning environment."

The majority of youth were ineligible for even the less competitive selective schools, like the school that Bart attended. Notably, however, the aura of these selective schools resonated throughout our conversations with ineligible students. Youth of all ages tended to express a feeling that all selective schools were "good" and all nonselective schools were "bad." Bella, a 19-year-old woman for whom a selective school was out of academic reach, explained why she wanted to attend one of these schools, and articulated this good schools–bad schools dichotomy: "Just because Baltimore, as far as high school, you have pretty known schools in Baltimore as far as the good and bad reputations. And high school it said that Hayes, Roosevelt, Thompson, Hinkley [4 selective schools], all of those schools are better schools than the other."

During the 10-year period that our youth were attending high school, Baltimore City was making a concerted effort to the improve the quality of the nonselective schools. Despite significant reforms and real improvements in measures of school quality (Smerdon & Cohen, 2009), Bella's perception of a gulf between the selective and nonselective schools does have merit. Indeed, as shown in Table 2, the average of the graduation rates of the nine selective schools in 2010 was more than 20 percentage points higher than the average of the graduation rates for the 30 nonselective schools.

Interaction of Policy and Student Background: "The Grades Chose It for Me"

Like Bella, many youth who did not attend a selective admissions school (n = 83) very much wanted to do so. These youth wanted to exercise choice in the way that the policy intends, in that they desired a school with a reputation for a strong academic program. However, they were denied access to these choices because of poor performance in middle school. Admission to most selective high schools in Baltimore City is determined by students' middle school grades and standardized test scores. For several of the students

we spoke with, poor academic performance in middle school was directly related to their high-poverty family and neighborhood environments.

Ralph's story illustrates how constrained school options can be for youth living in Baltimore's poorest areas. Ralph, age 21, attended four different middle schools; his family moved frequently because of financial difficulties, and because bullies in some of the high-poverty middle schools that he attended frequently picked on him. Given his frequent mobility and concern for his physical and emotional safety, it is not surprising that Ralph's grades were poor in middle school. When given the choice in eighth grade about where to go to high school, he very much wanted to go to one of the selective high schools but did not qualify. As a result, he felt that he did not have a real choice: "I had bad grades so the grades chose it for me. . . . it was the lowest school, baddest school. Yeah, that school is very bad." We cannot know if Ralph would have been eligible for a selective admission school if his family had not moved around so much or had he not been bullied in middle school. However, his story suggests that a tumultuous middle school experience has long-term consequences for the kinds of subsequent school choices available to youth, and that growing up in a high-poverty context makes it even less likely that a youth will go through those early adolescent years unscathed.

How did youth like Bella and Ralph, who were ineligible for a selective school, choose from the remaining options? Next we discuss how youths' families and experiences in dangerous high-poverty neighborhoods shaped their school choice decisions by compelling them to prioritize concerns about neighborhood safety over academics and by limiting their access to a social network that could provide them with information about school quality.

Prioritizing Safety: "My Life Is Too Precious"

Baltimore consistently ranks as one of the most dangerous cities in America (Fenton, 2011). Crime rates in the city were particularly high in the neighborhoods where many of these youth were living when it was time to choose a high school. Many of these children have witnessed violent crime and often interact with people who are directly involved with the drug trade (Clampet-Lundquist, Edin, Kling, & Duncan, 2011). Through our analysis of students' school trajectories, we found that youth not only encountered violence in the streets but also faced it at school. We heard stories of violent fights between students, and between teachers and students, and a number of stories of bathrooms and garbage cans being lit on fire. These firsthand accounts of school violence were so common that safety became the most important criterion that some students used in deciding whether to go to a particular high school. Lauren, 17, said that

when she chose among three nonselective high schools in eighth grade, her own physical safety was her primary concern:

> Parker was out of the picture completely. . . . they're too danger-ous for me . . . my life is too precious and I knew too many people up there who done got hurt and stay in fights. . . . So I guess Hawthorne, and then it's closer to me, I believe, so okay, I guess that's the school.

In addition to safety during the school day, youth were concerned about their safety while traveling to school. One of the most common safety strat-egies youth employ is avoidance of places where they are not well known (Clampet-Lundquist, 2011). We found that school choice decisions were also shaped by youths' desire to not have to travel outside their neighbor-hood for high school.

Ashanti was a 21-year-old high school graduate who was living in public housing when we met her. The primary reason she gave for why she chose her high school was that it was "close," which meant, "my mother didn't have to worry about me." Similarly, Tyreek, 23, decided not to attend the trade school he was eligible for because he wanted to stay in his neighbor-hood. He explained:

> Oh, cause it was close . . . coulda went to Jefferson [a selective trade school]. That's a good school they have trades and all of that stuff. I just ain't—I just wanted to go to Hawthorne because it's close . . . like all neighborhood people went to that school. Everybody just want to go to that school.

Although opting to stay in their neighborhood school may not have increased their educational opportunities, the perception of Ashanti, Lauren, and Tyreek that picking a school close to home was a way of stay-ing safe seems reasonable given the dramatic stories we heard from youth who did leave their neighborhood to attend high school. They told us sto-ries of people fighting on buses and at bus stops. Bart said that he would arrive at his middle school over an hour early each morning so that he could avoid taking the bus with his classmates who were bullying him on the way to school. Chase, 16, lived with his grandmother, girlfriend, and son on the East side of Baltimore. He described to us the consequences he faced for attending high school outside his neighborhood:

> Eastside, Westside always been beefing so I go over there and I'm saying I'm from East. I'm only cool with a couple of people that I thought I was cool with. I'm telling them I'm from the East you know what I mean. I'm just trying to go over I mean make some-thing happen. And then I - around that time I think I still did have

> a little bit of drugs. I got into like two fights. I said I can't do it up here. I'm not going to keep coming to school and then I am the only person over here by myself.

Chase's experience attending a non-neighborhood school was likely to be particularly risky because for a while he was selling marijuana and involved in a gang during high school. However, his story underscores the sentiment, heard throughout many of our interviews, that interacting with people and institutions outside one's neighborhood is dangerous (cf. Briggs, Ferryman, Popkin, & Rendón, 2008). Given the threat these youth perceive when they consider leaving their neighborhoods, it is clear that school choice policies face challenges in helping bright inner-city youth attend schools outside their neighborhood that might be more beneficial for them.

Limited Information: "I Was Asking People What School Did They Go To, and They Was Asking Me What School I Went To"

When making school decisions, parents often rely on their immediate social network for information, and researchers cite this as a reason why low-income children do not benefit from school choice policies (Neild, 2005; Schneider et al., 1998). Consistent with this research, we found that *youth* are relying on their peers and immediate family to provide them with advice about where they should go to school. Often the people in a child's immediate social network did not have the best information about school quality. Other youth cited having a family legacy at a particular school as the reason they chose that school. Monique, 15, was just about to start high school during the summer that we spoke to her. When it was time to pick a high school, she chose between the high school that her mother attended many years ago, and the school that her brother was going to. She ultimately decided to attend her mother's school. She explained:

> Cause my Mom used to go there and we was talking about it. And I was like—it sounded like a good school cause she know people there. And she would like—there's probably people still there that she know and I might get used to them cause she knew them.

Whether this was the right choice for Monique we cannot know. However, given how much schools in Baltimore have changed in the years since her mother attended makes it seem unlikely that the school would be similar to the way her mother remembered it. What is notable, however, is that Monique's criterion for choice is familiarity and the possibility of people being "known" there rather than academic or extracurricular programming.

As noted in Table 3, a handful of parents took an active role in their child's school decision-making process. Although the majority of students navigated

the school choice process on their own, approximately 20% reported that their parent or another significant adult in their life guided their decisions. Sometimes taking this active role seems to have improved the quality of school that the youth attended. Our data suggest that some of the youth who did have a parent or other significant adult leading them through the process often ended up attending better schools than they would have if they had made the choice on their own. For example, a small group of the youth in our full study sample talked about a parent choosing to move to the county so that their child could access better high schools.[7] Others mentioned a teacher or coach who compelled them to attend the most rigorous high school available to them. Taniya, 16, had the test scores and grades to qualify for an all-girls selective admission high school that had one of the highest graduation rates in the city. However, Taniya did not like the idea of an all-girls school and thought she wanted to be a hair stylist when she grew up. Therefore, she was planning to choose a less rigorous trade school over the college preparatory all-girls academy. She described how her teacher guided her away from that choice and "convinced" her that the all-girls school would be better:

> Taniya: Girls state too much drama, I'd rather be in co-ed. . .
>
> Interviewer: And then what was it about that school that your teacher liked, why did your teacher want you to go there?
>
> Taniya: She said . . . I had the grades, and she was like she think it'll prepare me for college.
>
> Interviewer: Okay. And but she didn't think the other school that you liked, Delaney, would do that?
>
> Taniya: She said that was good but she just said do you really wanna stand on your feet doin hair all day…?

Taniya was preparing to make her school choice on the basis of common teenage social concerns and little information about future career prospects (see also Holland & DeLuca, 2013). However, unlike many teenagers we interviewed, Taniya had an adult in her life who helped her see how her decision might influence her future and compelled her to prioritize her professional goals over non-academic concerns.

We also found that in some cases, parents did not have access to accurate information about school quality and inadvertently steered their child toward a low-performing school. Antonio, 23, told us that that he qualified for a selective school but his mother told him to go to a comprehensive high school close to his stepfather's house:

> She thought it was this good school. It wind up being the worst school in the city at that particular time before they broke it up.

. . . They beat this boy, on my first day of school. . . Took all his clothes off and fractured his skull, and they beat him so bad. . . . My mother got me in that school to get me away from [his dangerous zoned school] . . . but that year I went up Bedford . . . you couldn't find a worse school.

When it was time to pick a high school, Joseph, 18, asked his teacher and fellow students for advice but got little information from either source. He ended up picking his high school in part because he liked the building it was in. Joseph explained how he ended up there:

Because in my eighth grade year they told us to pick classes and stuff, and I was asking people what school did they go to, and they was asking me what school I went to. And I was like, I asked my teacher, I said, "Is there by any chance I can go to Hinkley [a selective school]?" . . . . And she was like, "No, your grades not high enough. Maybe you should try Bryce Academy [an alternative school]." And I was like, "No." So, I checked out Franklin, just randomly pick it. I checked out Franklin and Williams, and I didn't get Williams, but I got Franklin, so I went down there. It's a nice building. It was always, fit to the weather, if you ask me. . . . Like, if it was hot, they always had the air on. If it was cold, they always had the heat on. I like that school.

The lack of useful information provided by Joseph's peers and teachers forced him to make his decision "randomly" and to evaluate his school's quality on the basis of its facilities. This school did not meet Joseph's needs, and he dropped out after an unsuccessful ninth-grade year.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF SCHOOL CHOICE DECISIONS FOR STUDENTS' LIVES?

One of the goals of school choice policies is to improve the educational outcomes of poor and minority students by increasing their access to higher quality, less segregated schools outside their neighborhood. Our findings suggest that youth were often unable to make these types of choices because of the constraints imposed on them and by their high-poverty family and neighborhood contexts. As a result, many students did not leave their neighborhood for high school, and others left their neighborhood only to end up in a school that did not support their academic and social development. Our data and research design did not allow us to make causal claims about the effects of these school choice processes on children's educational or occupational outcomes. However, some youth shared thoughts about how their high school choice influenced their transition into adulthood.

Matthew, 21, now a father of a 3-year-old son, dropped out of high school before achieving his diploma. Although he is committed to providing for his son, he has struggled to find full-time work in recent years and explained that most jobs that he would want, such as working in a warehouse, require at least a GED. Although he told us that he "hated school," Matthew regrets his decision to drop out, and insisted that he would not let his son make the same choice. Notably, Matthew attributed some of his struggles in high school to his poor decision about where to attend. When it was time to pick a high school in eighth grade, Matthew decided to go to Harbor High School because he thought it was a good school, and it was where most of his friends were going. He wishes he had made a differnt choice, and said, "I shouldn't have went there. . . . 'cause more people—you get in trouble with them so I was getting into trouble. . . . like not going to class, stuff like that. Being late, just mess with the wrong people at the wrong time."

In addition to his high school, it is likely that a number of factors contributed to Matthew dropping out of school. For example, Matthew said that his father wasn't there for him as a child because he was constantly in and out of prison; he even speculated that he might have stayed in school if his father had been there to guide him through those difficult teenage years. Although his school did not necessarily cause Matthew to drop out, his unstable family context made him more vulnerable to a poor school choice, and made it much more difficult to overcome the challenges faced in the high school that he did attend.

Like Matthew, Elijah feels that his decision had negative consequences for his academic achievement. He told us that he wanted to go to a selective school and thinks that he may have been eligible. However, because he was living with his cousin and attending school in the suburbs for the last two years of middle school, he missed the district's deadline to apply to a selective high school. Instead he ended up attending the high school in the high-poverty city neighborhood that his mother was living in. Elijah explained why attending high school with other kids from the neighborhood was not good for him:

> It was, like all right, like you all, like the local neighborhood kids, you know everybody around there cause you outside with 'em like that. Then you all go to the same school, some of you are in the same class. . . . So you all would sit next to each other, you're all gonna play, you're all gonna crack jokes, ain't gonna do no work, or if you all do do work you're all gonna be sittin next to each other, getting answers off each other. And it was like there was just like the neighborhood friends.

Elijah got passing grades, but told us that the classes were boring and that the school had very little to offer in the way of extracurricular activities

or advice about postsecondary options. Although he avoided significant trouble in his neighborhood, he was suspended for fighting at school and reported that he spent a lot of time in hallways with friends when he should have been in class. At the start of his 12th-grade year, Elijah asked his mother if he could stay with his cousin in the suburbs so he could finish high school in a place where he could "keep it to a minimum of friends." When he arrived at this new suburban high school, he quickly realized that he should have attended that high school for all four years, given that it offered a lot more extracurricular activities, interesting classes, and job training:

> Oh, Greeley [the high school in the suburbs], yeah, that was an Academy, that was a good school. Like they had the automotive up there but I didn't know about it because I was up there, only went up there for one year and then they was like yeah, you had to be up here, I think you had to start that in the ninth grade or maybe the 10th. . . . And I was like dang, I wish I'd a known, I'd a came up here, but I ain't know nothin about it.

Although Elijah stayed on track and earned his diploma, he was neither working nor in school one year after graduation, and was having trouble finding a job. Although we can't know for sure if Elijah would be in college or gainfully employed if he had had access to better information when making his high school decision, it seems likely that if he had been accepted to a selective trade school or spent all four years in a suburban school, he might have had better options after graduating.

DISCUSSION

Our analysis of how low-income Baltimore City youth describe how they picked their high schools reveals some of the problematic assumptions policymakers and researchers make about how school choice operates. First, rather than parents making school choices on behalf of their children, youth were more likely to take the lead in those decisions. We also found that youth do not face an open educational marketplace. Instead, their choice set is constrained by the system of selectivity among the city's highest performing schools, and also by their own concerns about neighborhood and school safety. Consistent with the research on the constraints facing low-income parents (Neild, 2005; Schneider et al., 1998), we found that youth do try to make informed choices about the dimensions that set schools apart from each other. As a result, these youth often made their choices on the basis of school characteristics that are seemingly unrelated to a school's academic quality, such as where their friends were going. There are many other non-academic reasons why youth end up attending

the schools they do. The interviews also demonstrate that family instability, childcare needs, parent work arrangements, and economic hardship all shape where children live and in turn often predict where they will attend school (cf. DeLuca & Rosenblatt, 2010; Rhodes & DeLuca, 2014). These important considerations often win out over calculated residential or school decisions among very poor families, suggesting that school choice programs rest on assumptions that may not hold for the most disadvantaged families.

Previous research demonstrates that inner-city parents have less information than middle-class parents and value aspects of school that are unrelated to academic rigor (DeLuca & Rosenblatt, 2010). Not only is that true for many of the families we spoke with, we also found that children play active roles in the decision-making process about where to attend school. Although it is possible that children in more advantaged settings also actively participate in the high school choice process, their parents are also better equipped with the kind of social networks, information, and cultural capital necessary to avoid the types of high schools that some of the youth in our sample attended (Lareau, 2014).

Our finding that inner-city youth are leading a process that is typically considered an adult responsibility is not surprising when we consider prior research on family management in low-income families. "Adultified" adolescents in poor households often play adult roles and take on responsibilities to meet a family's practical needs. Burton (2007) found that there are both "assets" and "liabilities" for adultified children. In the context of our study, students making their own decisions about school do so with a variety of constraints, such as limited information, poor academic backgrounds, and concerns about neighborhood safety. Our findings underscore the importance of taking youth decision-making processes seriously in research on school choice. As policy makers try to improve school choice policies, they must acknowledge that youth will be central players in the school choice and should develop programs and policies that help youth choose schools that will promote their future educational and career opportunities.

The de-concentration of poverty in neighborhood schools is one of the goals of open enrollment policies in segregated cities like Baltimore. For these policies to work, students in high-poverty neighborhoods must be willing to leave their neighborhood for high school. Our interviews reveal that concerns about safety and familiarity loom large among the Baltimore youth, which is a function of growing up on some of America's most dangerous streets. If students do not feel safe leaving places where they are "known" and "know" other people, they are unlikely to take full advantage of school options across the city. Future research on school choice needs

to account for how social contexts outside of school influence how school choice policies are interpreted and enacted. Furthermore, the capacity for school choice policies to achieve their intended goals within an urban school district is inextricably linked to neighborhood conditions. In the long-term, improving the educational outcomes of inner-city youth will require coordinated public policies and programs that aim to improve school and housing choices for low-income families (cf. Ellen & Horn, 2012).

Our findings on the importance of youths' social networks for school choice are consistent with the school choice research literature on how parents make school choice decisions (Neild, 2005). We note that the social networks of the families in the study were limited almost exclusively to other family members, leaving youth with little access to information about schools outside their neighborhood. Some youth mentioned a teacher or coach opening their eyes to school options outside of their immediate school zone. Promoting these types of supports and other counseling could help youth find the high school best suited for their needs and interests.

It is difficult to know for sure if the youth we interviewed would have experienced better outcomes if they had received support in choosing schools outside their neighborhood. Our data suggest that low-income students entering Baltimore City high schools between 2000 and 2010 perceived a stratified educational marketplace, one that provided few real options for students with academic hardships. For example, in 2010 there were only nine Baltimore City schools that could be characterized as selective or career preparatory, leaving all students who did not qualify for these schools to choose among the nonselective lower performing high schools. This means that a student's academic history at the time of high school entrance strongly influenced choice, not a process of considering the various dimensions of fit, course offerings, and extracurricular programs that might characterize a more effective choice process.

In recent years, policymakers and the media have lauded the idea of school choice, with its free market appeal and its potential to open up the educational landscape to disadvantaged youth who had previously been left to attend only under-performing zone schools. However, as with many policies, the assumptions required for school choice programs to have a beneficial effect are oversimplified, and fall apart when met with the complex realities of struggling families and beleaguered school districts. In this article, we showed that poor families and youth in our sample approached school choice in ways that are quite different from those intended by policymakers. Future research on school choice must consider the social contexts in which these policies are enacted and experienced.

NOTES

1. Respondents with no experiences in the Baltimore City school system had moved to the suburbs, other parts of Maryland, or out of state at young ages. Some of these moves happened through the MTO program.

2. Intercoder reliability was achieved through an extensive training process before coding began. The team of primary coders worked on the same text segments and compared coding—in particular, the extent of the overlap in code usage, new codes that were not already in the codebook, and interpretation of coded segments where there were discrepancies between coders. Additionally, as transcripts were being coded, the study principal investigators and the second author did random checks on 15% of each coder's transcripts to ensure that the coder was adhering to the codebook.

3. We provide a description of the Baltimore City policy context as background here but note that our findings should not be interpreted as an evaluation of Baltimore City's school choice policy. The district made significant changes to its policy over the 10-year period that our sample was entering schools.

4. Notably, two of the nonselective schools hosted selective academic programs within them. It is also important to note that over this period, the district maintained a few alternative high schools for over-age undercredited students, youth with severe learning disabilities, and children with behavioral challenges. According to the 2010 Maryland School Report Card, in 2010, there were nine alternative high schools in Baltimore City serving 2,034 students in Grades 9–12.

5. Eighteen students told us that they attended a high school in Baltimore City but had no choice about what school they attended. These 18 students were older (median age of 21) than those who acknowledged some school choice (median age of 19.7). It is likely that many of these students were entering high school before the high school choice policy was fully implemented. If they did not qualify for a selective school, they probably did not have a choice. For an additional 14 students, we are missing information regarding who made the decision about school choice.

6. Previous research on the parents of these children lends support to our finding that the youth themselves were making school decisions, given that parents frequently indicated leaving these choices up to them (DeLuca & Rosenblatt, 2010).

7. Coupling residential choice with school choice may be common for more advantaged families (Lareau, 2014). We note that only a small number of youth said that their parent moved them or their whole family outside the city to improve their access to a high quality school. This finding is consistent with interviews conducted with parents in 2003 with the Baltimore MTO adult sample, who were the parents of the youth in this study. DeLuca and Rosenblatt (2010) find that many families did not use their MTO voucher to access higher quality schools for their children, and that even those families who moved to a higher performing school district sometimes kept their children in a city school.

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TECHNICAL APPENDIX

This article is part of a larger study that focuses on how family, neighborhood, and school contexts influence low-income urban youths' transition into adulthood. Although school choice policies per se were not central themes of the original study design, school mobility and educational transitions were; previous work by the authors suggested that youth change schools often and that these school changes are linked to other family dynamics and neighborhood characteristics (Condliffe, Warkentein, & DeLuca, 2013; DeLuca & Rosenblatt, 2010; Gasper, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2010). In the process of conducting the interviews, we realized that how youth ended up in their schools was not only related to family instability and housing decisions, but also situated in the context of Baltimore's rapidly changing school choice expansion. During our analyses, we discovered that these decisions were rarely being made in ways that policymakers intend. In this appendix, we provide additional information on the data collection and analysis procedures.

DATA COLLECTION

The semistructured interview guide was the primary data collection tool used in this study. The development of the interview guide was a collaborative process between the study principal investigators (PIs) and the interview team. Once the interview guide was drafted, we conducted 10 pilot interviews. Again, the study PIs and interview team worked together to revise the guide based on the pilot interviews. Because interviews were intended to be in-depth and semi-structured, interviewers were trained to let the interview flow as a comfortable conversation with the respondent, while still ensuring that they addressed all major questions and probes provided in the guide.

   All respondents were asked some basic questions about their schooling history. Usually these questions were asked at the start of the interview. Following are the questions that all interviewers were trained to ask all respondents about their schooling experiences, including the original question and follow-up probes:

1. **I'd like to hear about some of your old schools. Tell me about all the high schools you went to. Let's start out with the first high school you were at.**
   Probe: Have respondent walk through each high school and explain why he or she left that school and went to another. Also, for each move, ask: "So how did you end up there, how did that happen? How did you feel about that?"

2. Tell me the whole story of how you chose your first high school.
(If applicable: How did you choose your second high school? *And so on, if needed*)

DATA ANALYSIS

Our analysis primarily relies on text that was captured in our primary coding as "school change." The four primary coders were instructed to code text as "school change" whenever a respondent talked about switching schools for any reason, which includes promotional school changes, choosing to go to another school, moving, or being forced into or out of a school because of disciplinary problems or school closure. The three authors read the text from this school change code and did additional coding of the same text to develop new secondary codes. These secondary codes identified who was in charge of the school choice decision-making process and described the primary reasons why youth ended up in their high schools. Some youth described having no choice for which school to attend because they were assigned to a particular school by the district, and these were coded as "no choice." For those youth who acknowledged having some choice, we identified the following school choice decision makers: youth, parents, youth and parent together, teacher or other significant adult. For those youth who indicated some awareness that they had a choice about where to go to high school or that there was some sort of school choice policy in the district, we identified the following categories as the most common reasons for why youth attended their schools:

- Chose school for academics or trade (Academics_Trade)

  - Chose school because it was close to their home (Proximity)

  - Chose school to get away from certain peers (Peers_Away)

  - Chose school to be close to certain peers (Peers_Close)

  - Chose school because a family member was going there or went there in the past (Family_Legacy)

  - Perceived limited choice because of prior academic performance (No Choice_Grades)

  - Did not choose school or perceived limited choice because of past behavior (No Choice_Behavior).

We also created a category called "Other" to capture reasons given by only a handful of youth. Reasons included in the Other category included residential mobility, pregnancy, or having a special academic need that could only be met at a certain school.

After identifying our codes for school choice reasons, we created a spreadsheet with each row capturing the school choice profile for each respondent. The information in the profile includes the primary school chooser for each respondent, the names and selectivity of all high schools attended by that respondent, and the primary reasons (one or two of the seven codes listed earlier) for why the youth ended up in each school. For most cases, this information was garnered by doing secondary coding of the school change code. Whenever information was incomplete in the school change code, we returned to the full transcript for the case so that we could fully identify all information. The authors coded some of the same text from the school change code and cross-checked the coding to ensure intercoder reliability in the secondary coding. In the table that follows, we provide greater detail on the meaning of the no choice code and each of the school choice reason codes and examples from the raw data.

Code	Meaning	Example from data
No choice	Youth explicitly says that he or she had no choice about where to go to high school and/or says he or she was assigned to a particular school but does not indicate a preference for a different school.	Interviewer: And then did you have a choice of high schools? Respondent: Mm, mm, no, we ain't have no choice at that time. Interviewer: So you went to, how did you end up going to Wakefield? Respondent: The zone. Interviewer: Oh, it's the zoned school. And that's, you were living here? –Tyler (male, age 19)
No Choice_ Grades	Youth indicates that his/her poor academic record blocked him/her from making a choice altogether or limited his/her choices.	Interviewer: And then when you went to Heritage, did you have a choice of schools? Respondent: Yeah. Interviewer: Yeah, tell me about what other - Respondent: I was trying to go to Jefferson [selective trade school] but they didn't accept me because you know my middle school grades weren't that good. So I had to just go to Heritage. They accepted me. – Ron (male, age 16)

Code	Meaning	Example from data
No Choice_ Behavior	Youth indicates that behavioral problems in previous school blocked him/her from making a choice altogether or limited his/her choices.	Interviewer: Now how had you chosen Bryce Academy [alternative school] in the first place? Respondent: I didn't choose Bryce, this was the thing with that . . . during seventh grade - sixth grade I did good. Seventh grade did horrible, was terrible, runnin the halls, skippin class. I would never leave school but I would just skip class and just be doin everything that I wasn't supposed to be doing. . . . Then eighth-grade year got on medicine and it started to have me really focused, doin what I needed to do. And the people, the thing that people like about me, they see that I be knowin, like if I know what's really goin on. Interviewer: Right. Respondent: Like I know if something is takin effect in my body and the medicine did help. It helped me to focus, it helped me to sit there. I got straight A's in eighth grade. But they said by me not doing good in seventh grade I couldn't get in the schools that I really wanted to get in. Interviewer: Mm, hmm. Respondent: So I applied for Washington, I applied for all the good schools. I applied for Hinkley, I applied for all the good schools but they said by me messin up in the seventh it affected me. So they sent a lot of people who was really doin good, they still sent them to Bryce Academy, a lot of people. –Sadie (female, age 20)
Academics_ Trade	Youth says that he/she selected his/her school because of its academic record, extracurricular offering, or trade program.	Rhianna did most of her middle school career in the county but moved to a City school in the middle of eighth grade. She said that she was much more advanced in her academics than the other students in her eighth-grade class in the City school and that this influenced her high school choice process (Summary). She explains: "A lot of the kids were behind so all of the work was easy to me. And when I got there [Baltimore City middle school] my teachers did really notice that I was more advanced so they encouraged me to apply to Thompson and Roosevelt [two selective schools] and the citywide high schools [other selective schools], everything, so that's what I did." -Rhianna (female age 22)

Code	Meaning	Example from data
Proximity	Youth chose school because it was close to home.	Interviewer: So what high school did you go to? Respondent: Parker. Interviewer: Parker? Respondent: Yeah. Interviewer: So what made you decide to go to Parker? Respondent: It was in my community. Interviewer: So pretty much, most students around here would go to Parker Respondent: Yeah. Interviewer: Did you think about any other high schools? Respondent: Not at the time. Probably at the last minute. After I finished applying to high schools. When it was too late to even apply. –Lily (female, age 20)
Peers_Away	Chose school to be further away from neighborhood or school peers.	Interviewer: How did you end up at that school? Is that one you have to apply for? Respondent: Yeah. I just like in middle school like you just - they give us a pamphlet - like a book with all the schools. I just picked the school that nobody from my school was going to go to. So a few of us picked that school like me . . . and my close friends picked that school. I wanted to go outside of the neighborhood so I guess I picked something that I knew that not everyone was going to go to. Interviewer: Tell me about that. Why did you want to go somewhere outside your neighborhood? Respondent: . . . I went to Stowe Middle School. . . . So they was like - they was like everybody from the neighborhood went there. And it was like you just stayed in trouble. Something always going on - a lot of drama. And I just wanted - it was like I went through that for middle school and elementary school. When I went to high school, I wanted everything to be different. I wanted to like - cause when you look at TV and you see the experience of high school, you are like that is what I want. Like cheerleading and football playing and homecoming and prom and all that. I just want a different experience for high school. –Sherika (female age 17)

Code	Meaning	Example from data
Peer_Close	Chose school to be close to certain peers.	My first choice was Wakefield because I knew my friends was going there so I got chosen at Wakefield and I went there and that's when it was like really like way more influencing people doing a lot of stuff like smoking it was like so many different areas going to the same school and it was fighting going on so I was like I would rather hook school then to be you know in here with all this other stuff. So I would hook school and smoke with my friends and stuff like that but now I look back on it (laughter) it wasn't good. That's not what you supposed to be doing at that age. Yeah but that's about it. –Kelly (female, age 22)
Family Legacy	Chose school because a family member was attending the school or had attended the school in the past.	Interviewer: Why is it that you put that one first? Respondent: Because that was the school that my brother went to. Interviewer: Oh, yeah? Respondent: And I just felt like if I went there I would be around a couple people that I know instead of being alone. –Jaquan (male, age 22)
Other	Chose school for reasons not captured in the aforementioned categories. These youths' reasons were noted in our coding to see if new patterns emerged and new categories needed to be created.	Some reasons that individual youth gave for picking their schools that did not fit into one of our categories included residential mobility, pregnancy, and having special needs.

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