



**A MIXED METHOD APPROACH
TO STUDY THE
PARENTAL SCHOOL CHOICE
PROCESS IN KANSAS CITY
JUNE 2017**





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PARENTAL SCHOOL CHOICE PROCESS IN KANSAS CITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2016, SchoolSmartKC, in collaboration with Show Me KC Schools and through the support of the Kauffman Foundation as a fiscal sponsor, contracted with Hazley and Associates, LLC (H&A) and the Kansas City Area Education Research Consortium (KC-AERC) to study the parental school choice process in Kansas City. Our team asked parents across Kansas City who live within the Kansas City Public School System (KCPSS) boundaries about their experiences navigating the school choice landscape. There are a plethora of schools in Kansas City leaving parents with the exciting yet daunting task of finding the best option. For example, the average kindergarten parent in Kansas City faces over 30 school choices. To learn about the Kansas City School choice process, our research team asked parents about information sources, driving factors, and obstacles that influenced their school choices. This report provides a summary of the findings based on 436 survey responses and focus groups with 103 parents.

The synthesis of our qualitative and quantitative results suggest that parents utilize a multi-step, multi-source process to learn about schools, yet they still struggle to access the detailed data they need to draw meaningful comparisons and conclusions about what school is best for their child. Moreover, the lack of a consistent process for learning about and enrolling their child makes the selection process particularly challenging, especially for those parents who have limited time and financial resources. Schools, community organizations, and civic leaders have the opportunity to improve the choice process by improving the quality, depth, and comparability of resources available to parents. As a result of this data analysis, four strategies could be employed to improve the school choice process: 1) Create a consistent enrollment system strategy to reduce the barriers and stresses associated with the process and eliminate some of the perceived inequities in the system; 2) Increase physical access to schools in addition to curriculum details and teacher and performance data. 2) Implement a dynamic parent education and engagement initiative to reduce the disparity in access to information and ability to positively impact schools. 4) Build upon the popularity and success of Show Me KC Schools, enhance and leverage its brand recognition.

KEY FINDINGS

- Parents engage in a multi-step process to learn about schools.
- Parents value school tours and the opportunity to see the teachers and classrooms in action.
- Parents struggle to understand the different types of schools.
- Parents want timely and reliable information on academic characteristics of the school, including academic performance data, teacher quality, school safety, and curriculum.
- Parents express frustration with the complexity and lack of information about the enrollment process.
- Teacher quality, parent involvement, and academic performance are the top factors in choosing a school. Yet, parents struggle to make comparisons among schools, particularly around academic performance and quality.
- Show Me KC Schools is a valuable resource for parents exploring school choices.
- KCPSS would benefit from a coordinated, up-to-date, detailed information system for parents navigating school choice.

Parents engage in a multi-step process to learn about schools. Survey and focus group results indicate that parents utilize multiple sources of data to learn about schools, typically combining online research, word of mouth and school tours or information sessions. Parents describe it as a multi-step process in which they weigh the different sources of information against each other over a period of time. In terms of relative usefulness, parents appear to value and trust in-person communication (teachers, other parents, community members) slightly above other sources of information.

One key finding in our study is that parents struggle with the school choice jargon, especially the differences between a signature, neighborhood, charter, and immersion school. Efforts to clarify what the school types mean (and don't mean) would greatly contribute to dispelling some of the misconceptions about schools.

Parents value school tours and the opportunity to see the teachers and classrooms in action.

70% of parents found school tours extremely useful and parents consistently cite school tours as a critical source in their decision-making. School tours may help parents get a sense of the school "climate" which seems to be embedded in parents desire for safe schools that are academically rigorous. As one parent noted, "Visiting allows you the option of seeing how the classrooms are structured; how things work. That's the biggest thing because who knows what's best for your child better than you?" However, 35% of parents reported that access to school tours is an obstacle. Focus group participants cited several reasons for not being able to attend school tours, including timing of tours, schools not being open to informal visits, and schools not allowing visits to parents who were not official residents yet. The openness of schools to offer tours, particularly informal tours, appeared to vary considerably across schools.

Parents need more timely and comparable information on academic characteristics of the school, including academic performance, teacher quality, school safety, and curriculum.

When parents were asked what information they would like but were not able to get, parents cited more detailed academic data. Focus group parents shared their frustrations about getting access to teacher quality information, curriculum, disciplinary practices, and school improvement plans. Much of this information can be found on websites and through other

resources, but parents noted that school and state websites were difficult to navigate and the academic data was challenging to interpret. They wanted a comparison table that included the factors that were relevant to their child.

Parents express frustration with the complexity and lack of information about the enrollment process.

In the focus groups, parents expressed frustration with the lack of timely information about enrollment procedures for some schools, including application deadlines, financial aid policies, wait list procedures, and lottery practices. They also described unclear and conflicting admission guidelines across and within school systems in Kansas City. Parents pointed out that school applications are due in different months, admission decisions are made at different time points and sometimes admissions guidelines change during the admission process. This problem leads some parents to enroll in multiple schools, which lengthens waiting lists and leaves parents without a clear answer until the last days before school begins.

Teacher quality, parent involvement, and academic performance are the top factors in choosing a school.

When asked to identify the top three factors influencing their school choice, parents identified teacher quality, parent involvement and academic performance. Parents elaborated on the importance of teachers in the focus groups, describing the importance of having teachers who emphasized rigorous academics, who were open and inviting to parents, and who created a safe, positive learning environment in the classroom. Although not cited as frequently in the survey data, transportation and diversity were discussed as meaningful factors that weighed into the school choice process.

Show Me KC Schools is a valuable resource for parents exploring school choices. Slightly over half of parents in our sample were familiar with Show Me KC Schools' resources. Parents found resources useful, particularly the organized school tours. One of the unexpected consequences of the focus groups was that unaware parents learned about Show Me KC Schools and the resources available, especially the website's capacity to compare schools. Word-of-mouth appears to be a promising strategy for expanding Show Me KC Schools' coverage.

ABOUT OUR TEAM

Hazley & Associates, LLC (H &A) is an educational consulting firm that specializes in research, evaluation and strategic planning. It offers innovative, comprehensive solutions to education and community engagement problems. This firm has a strong community focus, energetic problem solving approach, and a diverse talent pool that is culturally and generationally sensitive which makes it an ideal partner for this research study.

KC-AERC is a consortium of researchers from four regional research universities—the University of Missouri-Kansas City, the University of Kansas, the University of Missouri Columbia and Kansas State University—and cooperating educational partners in the metropolitan Kansas City area. The primary purpose of KC-AERC is to provide educational partners, as well as state, community and private sector stakeholders with access to the highest quality research relating to student achievement, classroom practice, and educational policy across Pk-20 education in the KC metropolitan area. Thirty-two regional school districts, various private and charter schools, foundation's, community colleges, economic development organizations, and the state Departments of Education in Kansas and Missouri currently collaborate with KC-AERC in this effort.

H&A is led by Dr. Melissa Patterson Hazley, a proud native of Kansas City, Missouri and a product of the Kansas City Public Education system. Dr. Hazley obtained her Bachelor's degree in Political Science and the Master's in Higher Education Administration with an emphasis in Student Affairs from the University of Missouri Kansas City, as well as the Doctorate in Educational Psychology from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. She worked at the college level as a campus administrator for several years before beginning a teaching and research career. Her research interests include education access for underrepresented and minoritized student populations and human motivation and self-regulated learning. Dr. Hazley is trained in mixed-method research design and community based action research. She has deep roots in the Kansas City area where she is currently serving on the Board of the Neighborhood Tourism Development Fund, and The Urban Summit of Kansas City Education Committee.

KC-AERC is led by Dr. Karin Chang, who has over 15 years of experience in educational research and evaluation. Dr. Chang holds a Master's Degree in Educational Administration and Policy from Stanford University and a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology and Research from the University of Kansas. For the past fifteen years, Dr. Chang has managed local, state and national evaluations, including 30 multi-site evaluations in the area of early childhood, K-12 education, and postsecondary attainment. Dr. Chang is a member of the American Evaluation Association and presents nationally on such topics as systems evaluation, college readiness, after-school evaluation, instrument development, and statistical modeling techniques. She is a consultant and trainer for the Council for Opportunity in Education, providing technical assistance and evaluation training for educational opportunity projects across the country.

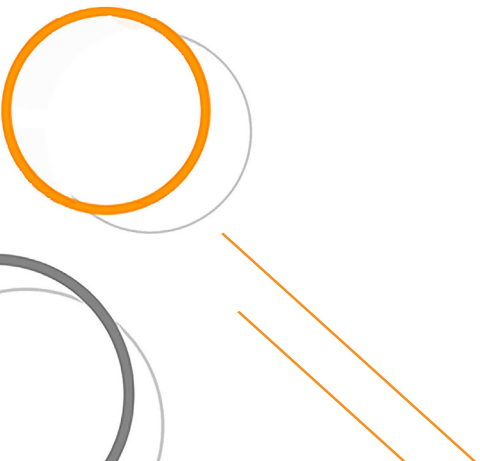


Table 2. School Sites							
KCPSS: Neighborhood Elementary	FG: Garcia	FG & S: Hale Cook					
KCPSS: Neighborhood Middle/High School		FG: East High					
KCPSS: Signature Elementary			FG & S: Border Star/Holiday				
KCPSS: Signature Middle/High School				S: Foreign Language Academy			
Charter: Elementary					FG: Academic Lafayette S: Genesis		
Charter: Middle/High School		FG: Hogan				FG & S: University Academy FG & S: Alta Vista	
Private/Parochial School							FG: Pembroke Hill
KCPSS Early Learning Program	S: St. Mark & Woodland						



In total, 436 parents completed useable surveys, and 103 parents participated in School Choice focus groups. Tables 3-14 describe the demographic characteristics of the sample, including school type, school location, grade level, years enrolled in the current school, gender, ethnicity, education level of the parent, income level of the household, language, a chart listing the names of the school that participants' children attended, family zip code and household type. Some percentages do not add up to 100% due to participant non-response. To ensure representativeness of the sample across the four quadrants and by school, the research team conducted an analysis to compare our sample with figures from the U.S. Census Bureau data and Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary database. Appendix E shows that the sample was fairly representative of the city's overall population. Our sample was underrepresented in zip code 64133 but this was expected because this zip code falls between KCPS and Raytown School District.

Table 3. Child School Type

	Survey Participants		Focus Group Participants	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Homeschool/Home-based Care	11	2.5%	2	1.9%
Preschool/Pre-K School	101	23.2%	14	13.6%
K-12 Public/Private/Charter	324	74.3%	86	83.5%

Table 4. Child School Location

	Survey Participants	
	Number	Percentage
Assigned school (public neighborhood)	71	21.19%
Another School	254	75.82%
Home School	10	2.98%

Table 5. Child Grade Level

	Survey Participants		Focus Group Participants	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Pre-K	113	25.9%	13	11.8%
Kindergarten	28	6.4%	11	10.0%
1st	55	12.6%	13	11.8%
2nd	33	7.6%	11	10.0%
3rd	42	9.6%	9	8.2%
4th	33	7.6%	6	5.5%
5th	23	5.3%	5	4.5%
6th	27	6.2%	6	5.5%
7th	12	2.8%	4	3.6%
8th	24	5.5%	5	4.5%
9th	10	2.3%	8	7.3%
10th	12	2.8%	10	9.1%
11th	13	3.0%	5	4.5%
12th	11	2.5%	1	0.9%

Table 6. Years Child Enrolled in Current School

	Survey Participants		Focus Group Participants	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
1	137	31.4%	39	37.5%
2	99	22.7%	23	22.1%
3	59	13.5%	10	9.6%
4	41	9.4%	11	10.6%
5	30	6.9%	10	9.6%
6	18	4.1%	5	4.8%
7	15	3.4%	3	2.9%
8	13	3.0%	1	1.0%
9	10	2.3%	0	0.0%
10	3	0.7%	1	1.0%

Table 7. Child Gender

	Survey Participants		Focus Group Participants	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Male	200	45.9%	31	29.8%
Female	236	54.1%	23	22.1%

Table 8. Parent Ethnicity

	Survey Participants		Focus Group Participants		KCPS Overall	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
White	86	19%	33	32%	12,329	27%
Black/ African American	219	50%	44	43%	20,327	44%
Hispanic/ Latino	89	20%	13	13%	9,878	22%
Asian	4	1%	2	2%	1,892	4%
Other/Multiracial	38	9%	10	10%	1,234	3%

Table 9. Parent Education Level

	Survey Participants		Focus Group Participants	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
8th grade or less	26	6.0%	7	6.8%
Some High School	31	7.1%	9	8.7%
High School Graduate	89	20.4%	0	0.0%
Some College	103	23.6%	23	22.3%
Associate's Degree	41	9.4%	11	10.7%
Bachelor's Degree	55	12.6%	17	16.5%
Some Graduate School	25	5.7%	3	2.9%
Graduate or Professional Degree	66	15.1%	28	27.2%

Table 10. Income Level

	Survey Participants		Focus Group Participants	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Under \$15,000	119	27.3%	16	15.5%
\$15,000-\$24,999	74	17.0%	16	15.5%
\$25,000-\$34,999	77	17.7%	12	11.7%
\$35,000-\$49,999	46	10.6%	21	20.4%
\$50,000-\$74,999	48	11.0%	11	10.7%
\$75,000-\$99,000	27	6.2%	11	10.7%
\$100,000 or higher	45	10.3%	14	13.6%

Table 11. Household Language

	Survey Participants		Focus Group Participants	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
English	355	81.4%	87	84.5%
Spanish	69	15.8%	6	5.8%
English & Spanish	0	0.0%	6	5.8%
English & Karen	0	0.0%	2	1.9%
Other	12	2.7%	1	1.0%

Table 12. Child School Name

	Survey Participants		Focus Group Participants	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Academie Lafayette, 4-8 Campus	3	0.7%	0	0.0%
Academie Lafayette, K-3 Campus	3	0.7%	9	8.7%
African-Centered Prep Elementary	3	0.7%	0	0.0%
Alta Vista High School	23	5.3%	7	6.8%
Benjamin Banneker Charter Academy Of Technology	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Benjamin Banneker Elementary	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Border Star Montessori School	41	9.4%	4	3.9%
Brookside Charter School, Middle School	2	0.5%	0	0.0%
Central Middle School	2	0.5%	0	0.0%
Citizens Of The World Charter Schools Kc	2	0.5%	1	1.0%
Cristo Rey Kansas City	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Crossroads Academy	5	1.1%	2	1.9%
Della Lamb Elementary, Wallace	3	0.7%	0	0.0%
Della Lamb Elementary, Woodland	32	7.3%	2	1.9%
Eagle Heights Christian School	0	0.0%	1	1.0%
East High School	1	0.2%	4	3.9%
Ewing Marion Kauffman School	4	0.9%	0	0.0%

Table 12. Child School Name cont.

	Survey Participants		Focus Group Participants	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Faxon Elementary	2	0.5%	0	0.0%
Foreign Language Academy	52	11.9%	1	1.0%
Frontier School Of Excellence, Middle	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Frontier School Of Excellence, Upper	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Frontier School Of Innovation, 4-8 Campus	2	0.5%	0	0.0%
Frontier School Of Innovation, K-3 Campus	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Genesis Promise Academy	14	3.2%	0	0.0%
George Melcher Elementary	3	0.7%	0	0.0%
Gladstone Elementary	2	0.5%	0	0.0%
Gordon Parks Elementary	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Guadalupe Elementary School	3	0.7%	0	0.0%
Hale Cook Elementary	37	8.5%	0	0.0%
Hartman Elementary	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Hogan Preparatory Academy Elementary School	1	0.2%	4	3.9%
Hogan Preparatory Academy High School	1	0.2%	5	4.9%
Hogan Preparatory Academy Middle School	3	0.7%	2	1.9%
Holliday Montessori School	51	11.7%	5	4.9%
Holy Cross School	2	0.5%	0	0.0%
Hope Leadership Academy	1	0.2%	1	1.0%
J.A. Rogers Elementary School	5	1.1%	0	0.0%
James Elementary School	3	0.7%	0	0.0%
Kansas City Academy	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Kansas City Neighborhood Academy	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Kipp Endeavor Academy	3	0.7%	0	0.0%

Table 12. Child School Name cont.

	Survey Participants		Focus Group Participants	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Lakeview Middle School	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Lincoln College Preparatory Academy	4	0.9%	1	1.0%
Longfellow Elementary School	2	0.5%	0	0.0%
Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Northeast High School	3	0.7%	0	0.0%
Paseo Academy Of Fine And Performing Arts	4	0.9%	0	0.0%
Pathway Academy	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Pitcher Elementary	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Pre-K Program	14	3.2%	4	3.9%
Primitivo Garcia School	3	0.7%	0	0.0%
Quality Hill Academy	3	0.7%	1	1.0%
Richardson Elementary School	0	0.0%	5	4.9%
Scuola Vita Nuova	5	1.1%	0	0.0%
St. Paul'S Episcopal Day School	2	0.5%	0	0.0%
St. Peter'S School	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
St. Pius X High School	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
The Barstow School	2	0.5%	0	0.0%
Topping Elementary School	1	0.2%	2	1.9%
Trailwoods Elementary	6	1.4%	0	0.0%
University Academy, Lower School	5	1.1%	0	0.0%
University Academy, Middle School	6	1.4%	0	0.0%
Upper Room Child Development Center	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Wendell Phillips At Attucks Elementary	3	0.7%	0	0.0%
Whittier Elementary	4	0.9%	1	1.0%

Table 13. Family Zip Codes

	Survey Participants		Focus Group Participants	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
61102	1	0.23%	0	0.0%
64030	2	0.46%	1	1.0%
64052	1	0.23%	0	0.0%
64056	1	0.23%	0	0.0%
64082	1	0.23%	0	0.0%
64104	1	0.23%	0	0.0%
64105	1	0.23%	0	0.0%
64106	12	2.75%	1	1.0%
64108	13	2.98%	3	2.9%
64109	17	3.90%	4	3.9%
64110	26	5.96%	10	9.7%
64111	14	3.21%	1	1.0%
64112	4	0.92%	2	1.9%
64113	12	2.75%	6	5.8%
64114	29	6.65%	10	9.7%
64117	0	0.00%	2	1.9%
64118	0	0.00%	1	1.0%
64119	1	0.23%	0	0.0%
64123	27	6.19%	3	2.9%
64124	35	8.03%	14	13.6%
64125	2	0.46%	0	0.0%
64126	21	4.82%	3	2.9%
64127	51	11.70%	7	6.8%
64128	20	4.59%	7	6.8%

Table 13. Family Zip Codes cont.

	Survey Participants		Focus Group Participants	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
64129	5	1.15%	0	0.0%
64130	47	10.78%	10	9.7%
64131	27	6.19%	8	7.8%
64132	45	10.32%	7	6.8%
64133	5	1.15%	1	1.0%
64134	5	1.15%	0	0.0%
64136	1	0.23%	0	0.0%
64137	1	0.23%	0	0.0%
64155	1	0.23%	0	0.0%
66102	2	0.46%	0	0.0%
66105	2	0.46%	0	0.0%
66213	1	0.23%	0	0.0%
66223	1	0.23%	0	0.0%

Table 14. Type of Household

	Focus Group Participants	
	Number	Percentage
Single Parent or Guardian	36	35.0%
Two Parents or Guardians	62	60.2%
Other	4	3.9%

DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

Community Locations

Recruitment at the community locations consisted of working with stakeholders to identify a liaison that then in turn helped recruit participants to a focus group on a designated date. If the community partner had an existing event, we worked with the liaison to collect surveys at that event. For example, we worked with a liaison at the Kansas City Stem Alliance organization to schedule survey collection at the First Robotics Competition held at the Metropolitan Community College. Parents participated in either a focus group or completed a survey. For those parents who participated in the study, we required them to participate in only one mode of data collection.

School Locations

Charter school participant recruitment was similar to community partner recruitment. Stakeholders assisted our team in identifying a liaison at targeted charter schools that would help recruit parents to participate in a focus group on a specific date or to collect surveys. In terms of public school participant recruitment, we first obtained clearance from the appropriate Kansas City Public Schools administrator who communicated with targeted building sites about the study. Then, we reached out to those school Principals to coordinate focus group recruitment and identify dates that surveys might be administered. Again, parents were asked to participate in one data collection activity, either a focus group or complete the survey, but not both. For example, we administered surveys as several schools during parent-teacher conferences and those parents likely did not participate in any of the focus groups.



DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Instruments

Appendix B and C include the final survey and focus group protocol. These instruments were initially created by our research team, guided by the research questions, and then perfected through an iterative feedback process with stakeholders, Show Me KC Schools, the Center for Reinventing Public Education and the EEIR. Surveys were administered electronically using iPads while focus groups were held in person, lasting about 1-1.5 hours, and were audio recorded with small recording devices for later transcription.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Surveys were administered at several community and school locations across Kansas City via iPads using the Qualtrics online survey platform. Researchers offered parents an English or a Spanish version of the survey, as well as one-on-one support during survey administration. In some cases, an interpreter read the survey to the respondent if English or Spanish was not the preferred language. In total, 436 surveys were collected between November 12, 2016 and March 4, 2017 including parents who reported they had not engaged in the school choice process, parents who were just starting, and parents who had recently completed the school choice process. The survey contained skip logic tailored to where parents were in the school choice process.

For the analyses, items were mapped to research questions. Descriptive statistics were computed for all of the forced-choice items. Open-ended questions were analyzed through thematic analysis. The research team, led by Dr. Argun Saatcioglu, reviewed the findings with key stakeholders as part of the data validation and review process.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The research team conducted 16 focus groups at various sites throughout the Kansas City area (see participants section). Each session was audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim and prepared for analysis. Each focus group yielded approximately 12-20 pages. Therefore, the research team analyzed more than 250 pages. Transcripts for each focus group were uploaded to qualitative software analysis program ATLAS TI ©. Then, the coding process began. This process included reading a transcript line by line and assigning a “code” to each sentence or set of sentences (usually no more than 2-3). This code is a keyword that defines the sentence meaning. Three researchers reviewed the initial coded transcript to determine if the codes were appropriate. Next, 2-3 additional transcripts were coded. Three researchers again reviewed these coded transcripts to ensure that the codes were appropriate. After that review process, the final codes were defined as the “code book” and this set of codes were used to code all remaining transcripts (16 total).

After all transcripts were coded, the research team analyzed the codes and sentences (sentences now referred to as quotes) to determine the most numerous codes and mapped the codes onto the key research questions. These codes and quotes were then analyzed and interpreted to determine answers to the key research questions. Appendix D contains a chart illustrating the most numerous codes. This “counting” process allowed us to determine factors or themes that were most common among participants in the qualitative sample. The research team, led by Dr. Melissa Hazley, reviewed the findings with key stakeholders as part of the data review process.

RESULTS

The educational landscape in Kansas City is vast and expanding, providing parents with a variety of school choices including public, private, charter, and parochial schools. Choice is good for families, offering them an array of options for educating their children, but with much choice comes new challenges. Educational leaders in Kansas City need to understand these challenges in order to help families make informed and confident decisions. To inform this work, we asked parents across Kansas City to share their experiences navigating the school choice process. Broadly, we asked: 1) What information sources are used to learn about school choices; 2) How can organizations help parents make better school choices that reflect an understanding of quality school characteristics; and 3) How are parents utilizing Show Me KC Schools services.

Parents told us that the best approach to learning about schools is to see schools in person followed by talking with other parents about schools. When choosing a school, parents wanted similar things: great teachers, a strong curriculum and an involved parent community. Unfortunately, parents described the enrollment process as cumbersome and time-consuming and that gathering information was a chore. It was difficult to find information such as teacher quality and school discipline that was accessible and comparable across schools.

The following section includes a more technical presentation of the quantitative and qualitative results. Then, we present the synthesis of the two sets of findings.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Sources of Information

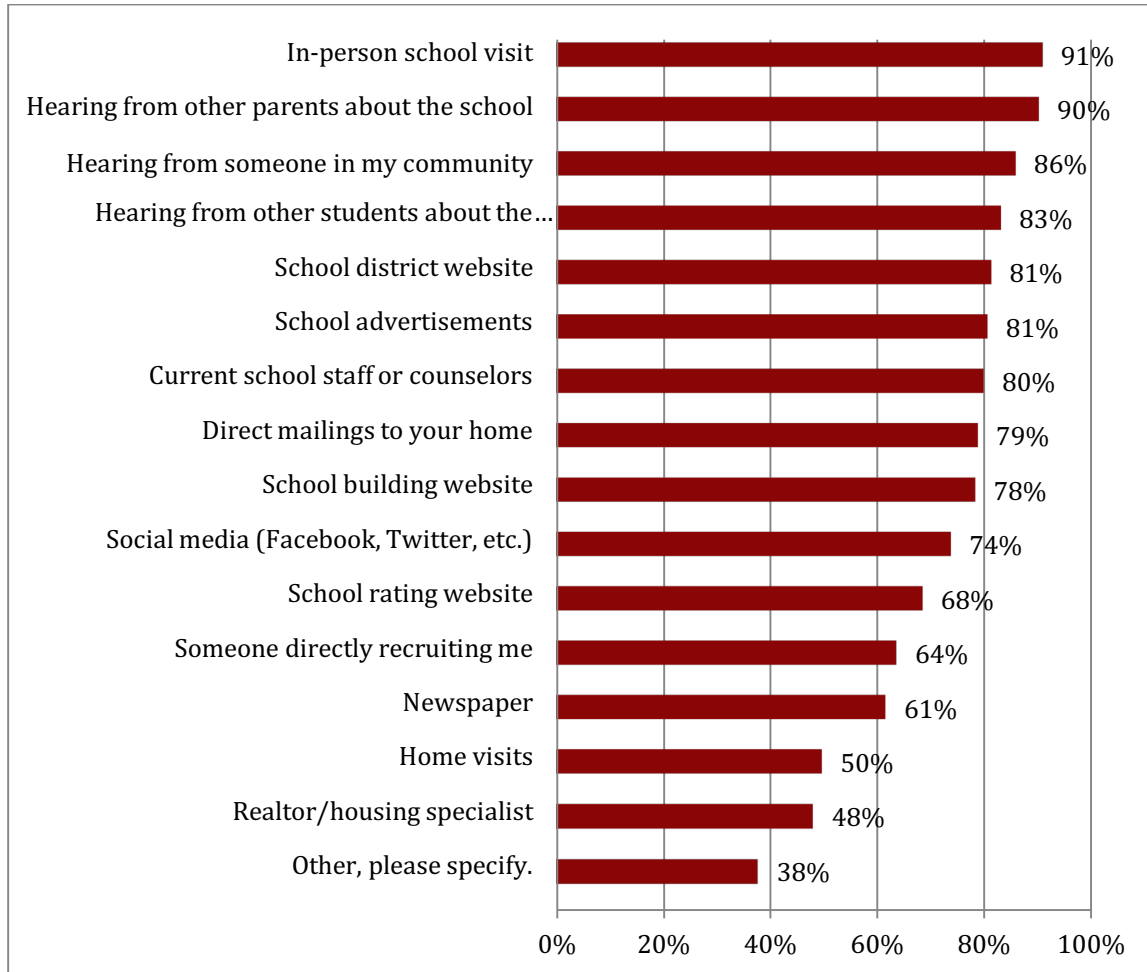
On the survey, parents were asked to rate the usefulness of fifteen commonly used school information sources on a four-point scale (1=Have not used, 2=Not at all useful, 3=Somewhat useful, 4=Very useful). The research team calculated the percent of people who had used each information source (i.e. did not indicate 1=Have not used).

Parents reported that they learned about school choices through multiple sources. The most frequently cited sources were in-person school visits (90.8%), parent networks (90.1%), followed by community networks (85.8%), parent-student networks (83%), school district website (81.2%), school staff and counselors (79.8%), direct mailings to home (78.7%), and social media (73.6%).

The rest of the information sources were used by about 60% of parents, except for home visits (49.5%) and realtors (47.9%). Parents appeared to prefer in-person communication (in-person school visits and hearing from parents, students, and friends).

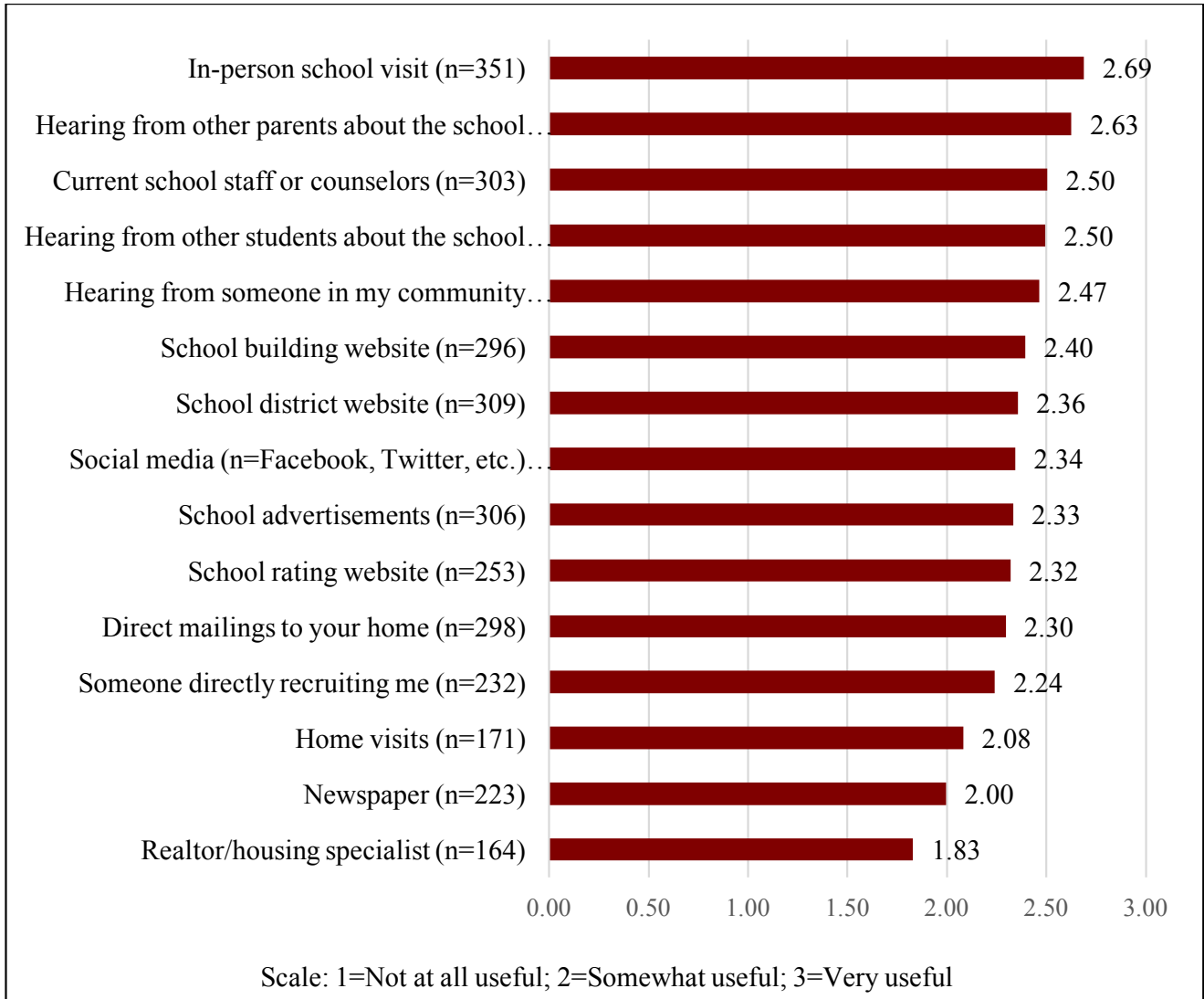


Figure A. Information Sources Parents Use or Plan to Use to Learn about Schools



Using the same survey item, researchers examined the usefulness of different information sources by calculating the average (mean) score for each information source. Higher mean scores were associated with higher parental ratings of usefulness. Parents rated in-school visits (2.69) and hearing from other parents about the school (2.63) as the most useful sources of information, followed by current staff or counselors (2.50) and hearing from other students about the school (2.50). Newspapers and read estate and housing specialists were rated as least useful. Overall, parents found in-person interactions the most useful for learning about schools.

Figure B. Parent ratings of the usefulness of school information sources



Parents were asked about information they would like but were not able to get about schools (missing information). Researchers analyzed the write-in responses using thematic analysis. Table 15 summarizes the sources of data that they wished they had access to during the school choice process.

Table 15. Missing Information

MISSING INFORMATION	
Academic performance and achievement	21
School rankings/school comparisons	15
School options	12
When and how to enroll	11
Curriculum Information	10
School climate information	7
School safety	6
Teacher qualifications and background	6
Disciplinary information	5
Parent feedback	4
School visit information	4
After-school programs and activities	4
Diversity of student population	3
IEP program	3
Information about accelerated/advanced coursework	3
How waiting lists and lottery pools work	2
Information about grading systems/scales	2
Information about what schools are dual-language	2
Retention rates	2
School accreditation information	2
School costs	2
Student feedback	2
Classroom sizes	1
Counseling services for students	1
Current events at the school	1
How to become more involved as a parent	1
How and when to contact teachers and principals	1
Information about available tutoring in non-English languages	1
Information about school feeder patterns	1
Info about what the neighborhood assigned school is	1
Part time enrollment options for homeschoolers	1
School and district improvement plans	1
School quality measures beyond academic performance	1
School schedules	1
School supply list	1
School transportation	1
School's mission	1
Staff support for students	1

On the survey, parents were presented with 19 different factors as plausible reasons for choosing a school. They were asked to identify the top 3 reasons, which help discern what they consider most important when forced to discriminate across several different reasons. Figures C-E show, respectively, the number of times any given reason was ranked as #1, #2, and #3. Teacher quality consistently has the highest ranking in this regard. Sixty parents ranked it as #1, 54 ranked it as #2, and 50 ranked it as #3. Thus, it appeared a total of 164 times in the top 3 ranking. Parent involvement (122) and academic performance (114) are a close second and third, followed by factors such as curriculum and safety.

Figure C. Number of times a given “reason” was ranked #1 for choosing child School

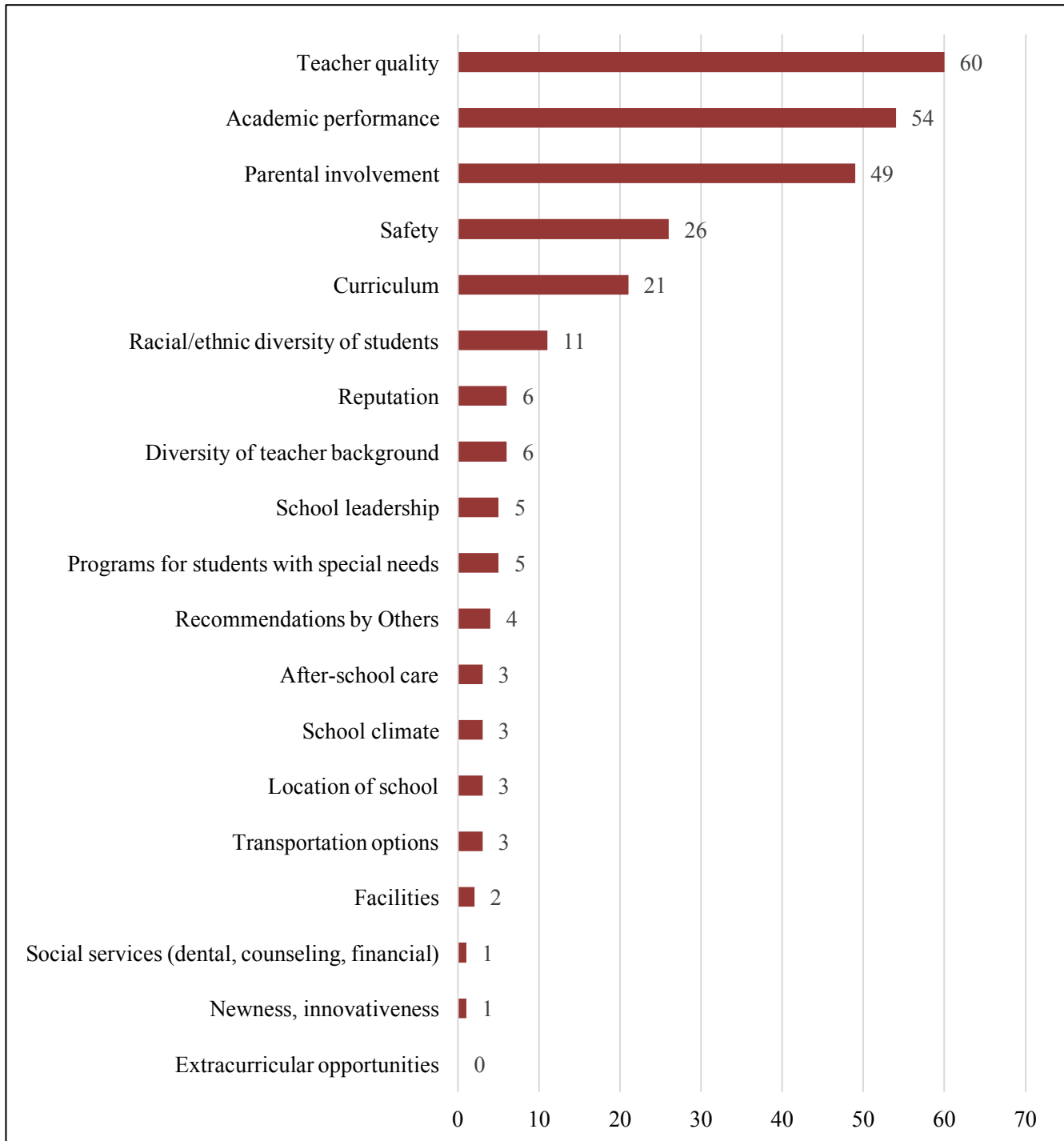


Figure D. Number of times a given “reason” was ranked #2 for choosing child’s school

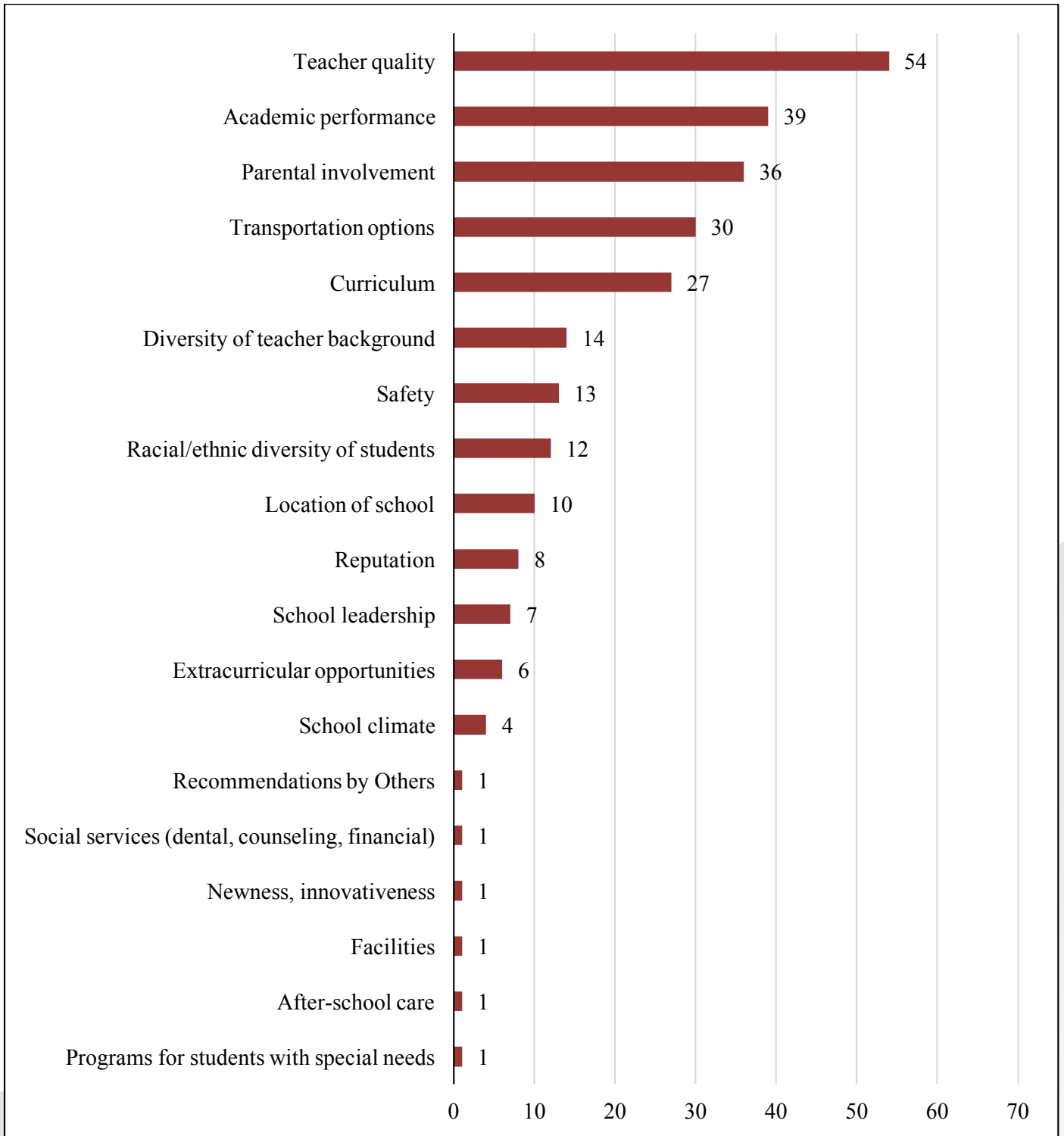
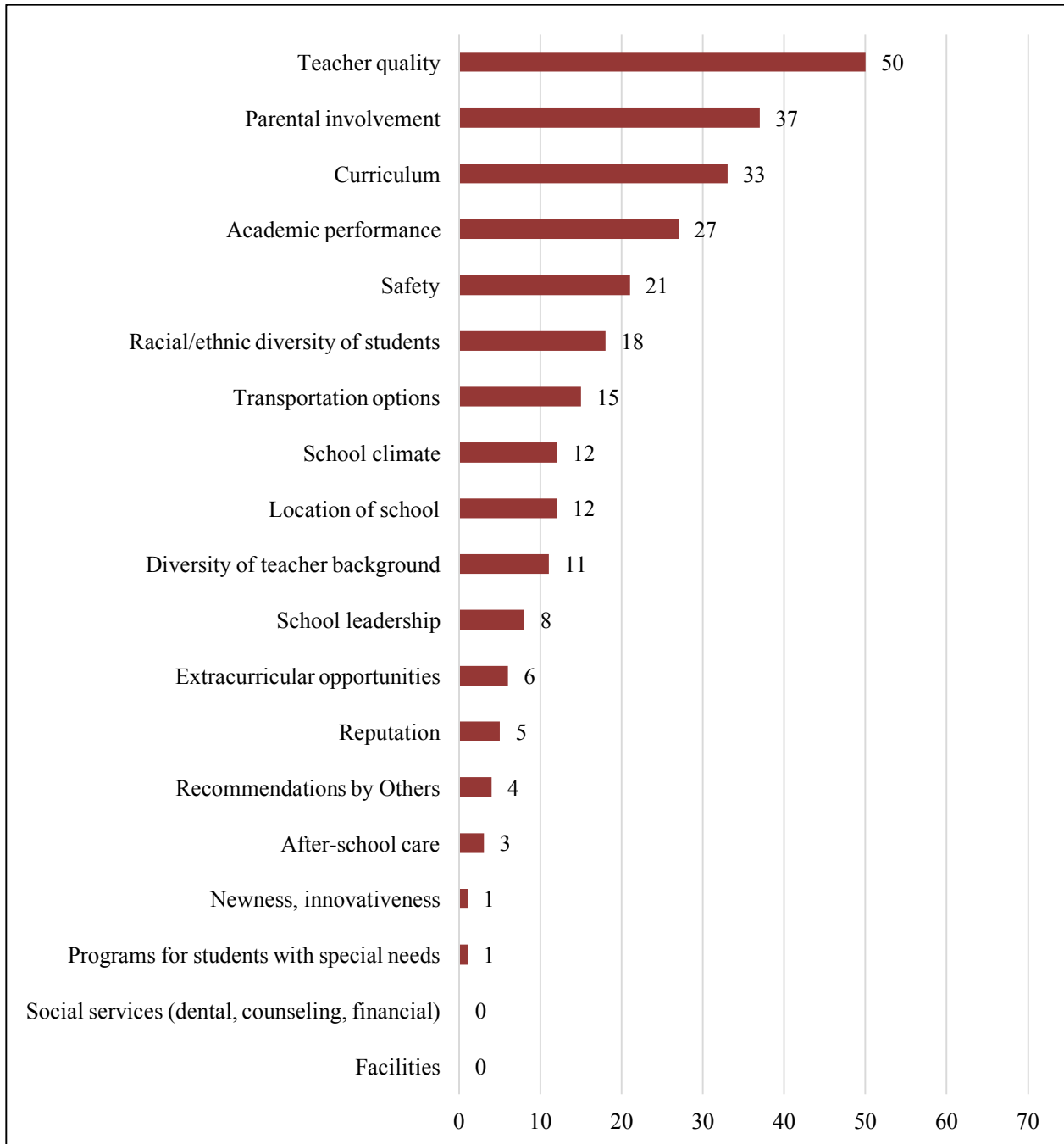
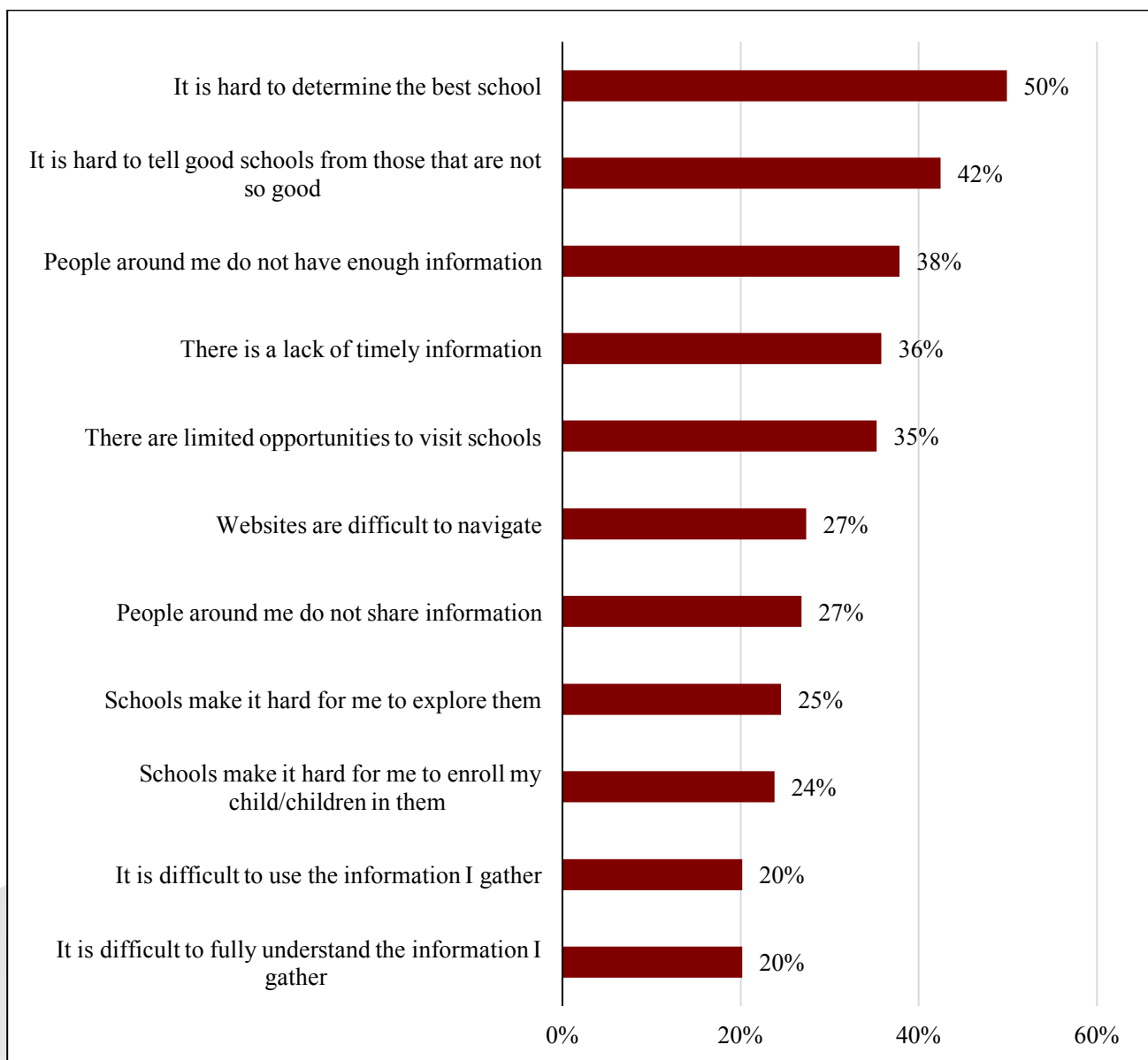


Figure E. Number of times a given “reason” was ranked #3 for choosing child’s school



Parents were presented a list of potential *obstacles* to gathering information about schools. Figure F shows the percent of parents identifying as an obstacle each item on the potential list. Nearly 50% of parents felt that it was hard to determine the best school and about 42% felt it was hard to tell good schools from bad ones. This suggests that parents either do not have clear criteria for judging schools or relevant information to apply such a criteria to make good judgments are not sufficiently available; or both. Considering the info sources they often use such as school visits, websites, and social networks, it is important to note that these sources may not be able to help overcome key sources of ambiguity. Interestingly, the next three most common obstacles in the chart are the lack of knowledgeable network ties (“people around me”), lack of timely info, and limited chances for school visits. The least common obstacle was information processing. This is contrary to many prevailing stereotypes of urban parents’ decision-making skills. Most such parents in this sample also appear to view as “non-obstacles” the websites, access to schools, and acquiring information from and sharing information with other parents around them.

Figure F. Obstacles to gathering information about schools

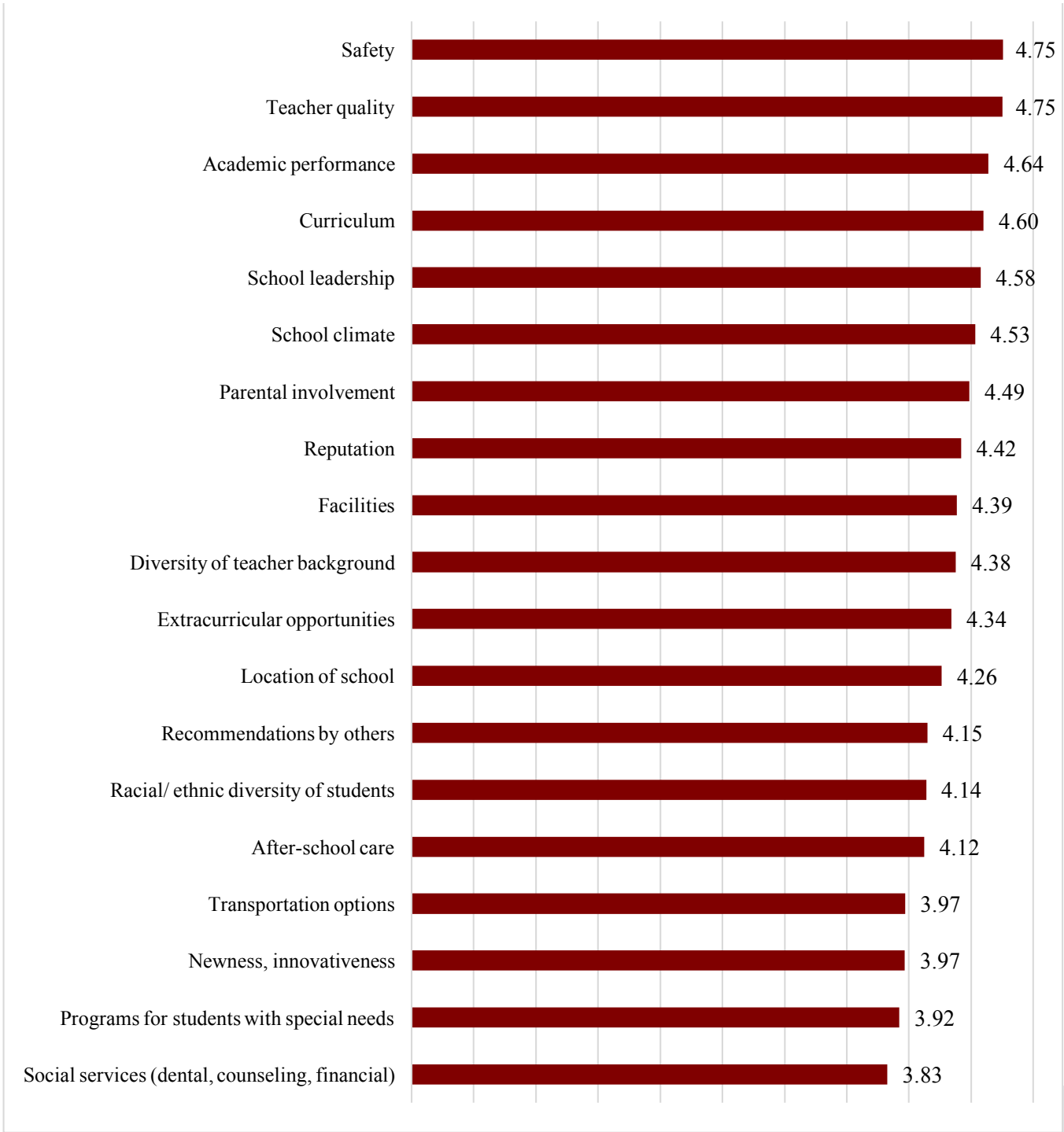


Note: Parents were asked to indicate “yes” if any items on the list were obstacles to gathering information about schools

Factors Influencing School Choice

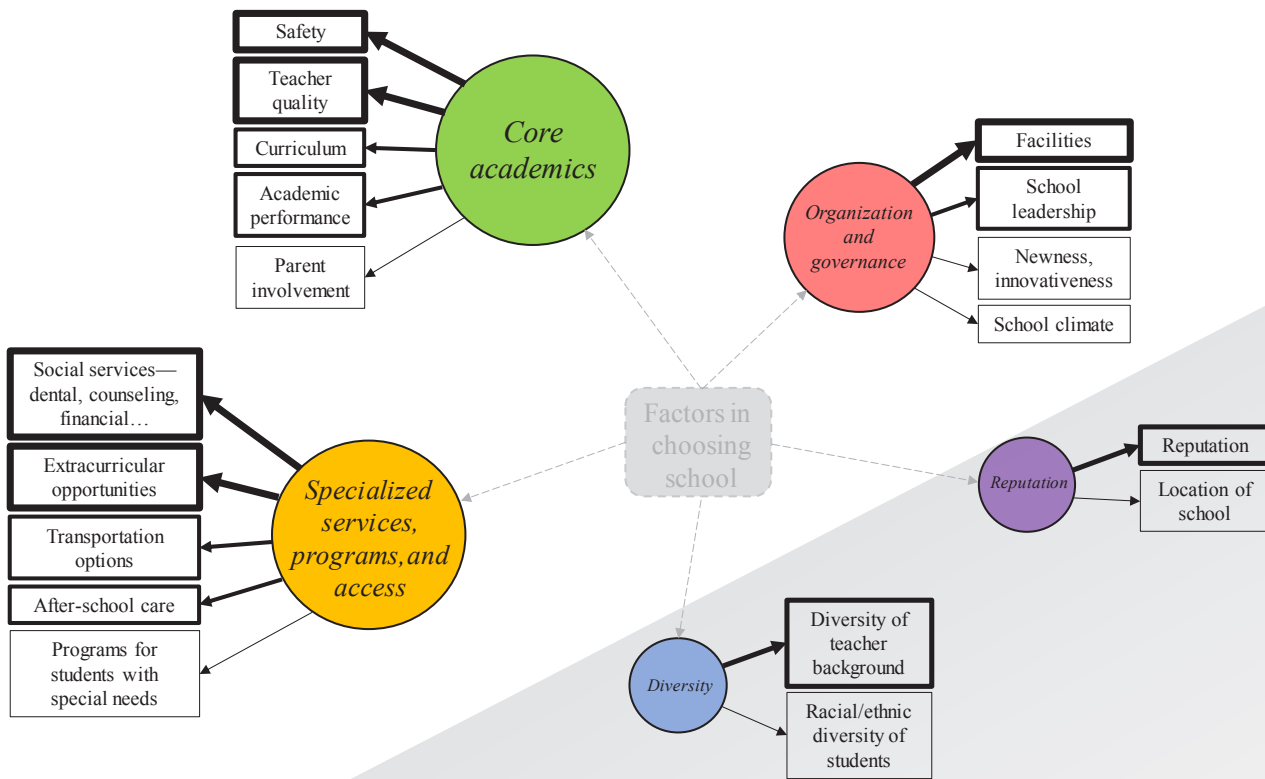
On a five-point scale (1=Not at all important, 5=Very important), parents were asked to rate 19 potential reasons or factors for choosing a school. Figure G shows the relative importance of the reasons. There are few reasons with ratings below 4, and these are only slightly below 4. Thus, most ratings are statistically similar in terms of average tendencies.

Figure G. Means for “how important” each factor is in choosing a school



To further investigate the factors that influence school choice, the research team examined thematic patterns among these ratings rather than compare individual ratings with each other. Using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses procedures that met robust criteria for model fit on the raw data five central themes, based on "importance" ratings were revealed. Core academics are comprised of safety, teacher quality, curriculum, academic performance, and parent involvement. A thicker line indicates that the item carries greater weight in the underlying theme. For instance, most parents view core academics as primarily function of "safety" and "teacher quality," although curriculum, academic performance and parent involvement do play key roles as well. In addition to these, parents care about specialized services, good organization and governance, good reputation, and diversity. Each of these themes has primary elements and secondary ones.

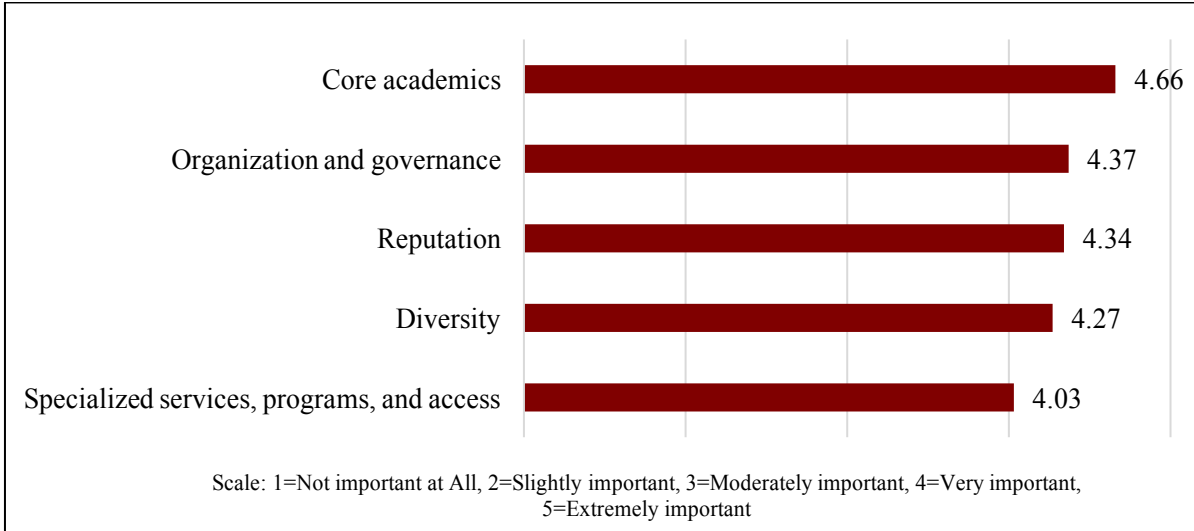
Figure H. Thematic Map of Parental Decision-Making Factors



*Model Fit: ($\chi^2=302.516, p<0.010$)

Using the five themes constructed through factor analysis, mean scores were calculated to gain a better understanding of the relative importance of the factors in choosing schools. Figure I shows the average “importance” rating for each theme in thematic map. Core academics was identified as the most important thematic factor and specialized services/programs/access is rated as the least important. Overall, however, ratings were fairly high for all thematic areas.

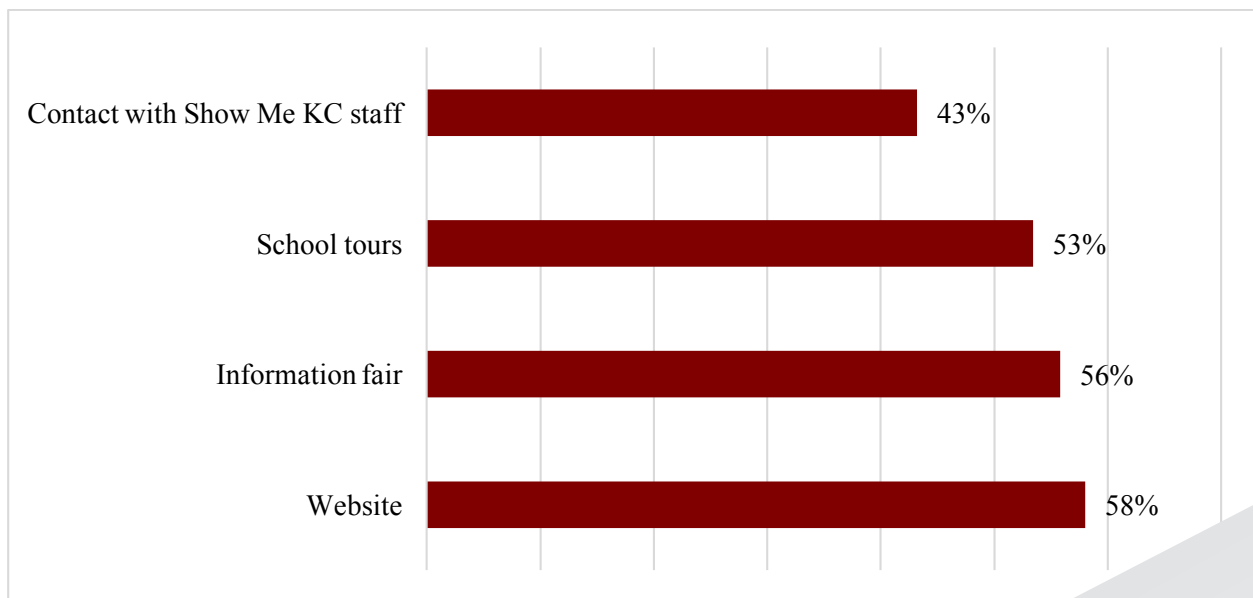
Figure I. Average “importance” ratings for factors in choosing schools



Parent Utilization of Show Me KC Schools

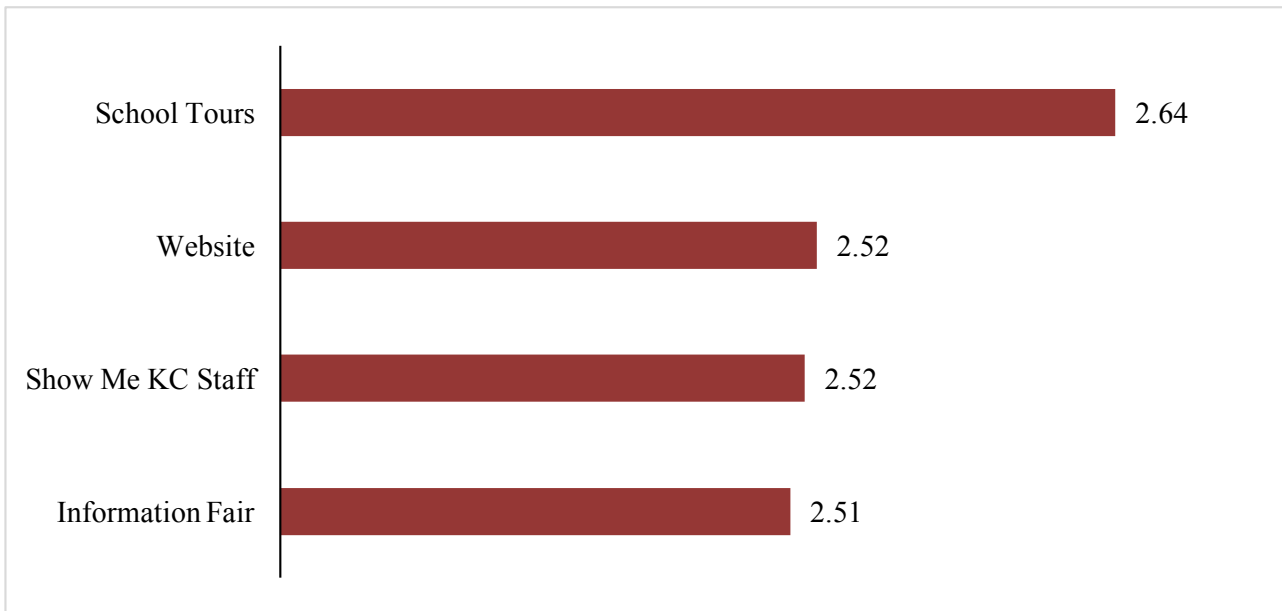
On the survey, parents were asked about their familiarity with Show Me KC Schools resources, including Show Me KC sponsored information fair, school tours, website, and school staff. Parent responses indicate that the website, school tours, and school fair were resources that more parents were familiar with—all well above 50%. Direct contact with staff was below 50%, and was statistically lower than the other options in the chart.

Figure J. Percent of parents who have used Show Me KC Schools resources



For parents who were familiar with Show Me KC Schools resources, school tours were rated the highest in terms of usefulness. The website, interactions with Show Me KC Schools staff, and information fairs were rated just below school tours. Overall, parents found Show Me KC Schools resources to be useful. When asked for suggestions for improvement, parents offered the following categories of recommendations:

Figure K. Parent ratings of the usefulness of Show Me KC Schools resources



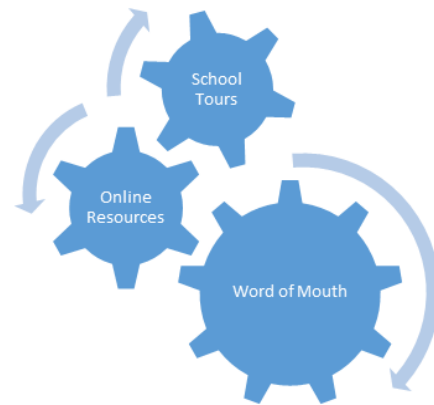
QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Sources of Information

While investigating the information sources parents use to make a school choice, three main themes emerged: *online research*, *word of mouth* and *participating in school tours*. These themes emerged as both the most used and the most helpful ways of learning about schools. These themes and the ways they might intersect are explained below.

A parent admitted, “I think the biggest thing was just going directly to the individual school and touring them and getting information from parents, family, and then staff.” Another parent added, “go for yourself because one person’s bad experience is now their reality of the entire school.” Other parents corroborate the problems with word of mouth. For example, a parent stated, “I feel like through word of mouth there is a lot of misconceptions about schools. I really found it so individual because we haven’t had the issues that a lot of people told us to expect.” Qualitative analysis of the responses suggests that the process of choosing a school is based on a combination of personal preferences, family resources, and individual factors. Parents describe it as a “multistep process”, illustrated in Diagram 1. These three steps, conducting prior research by gathering information online, networking with other people or “word of mouth”, and exploring and evaluating available options by touring schools directly, occurred in no specific order before finally enrolling their children in a school. A parent summed it up, “you can look at the test scores, see where they rank but visiting allows you the option of seeing how the classrooms are structured, how things work. That’s the biggest thing because who knows what’s best for your child better than you?”

Diagram 1. Sources of Information



Each step in the information gathering process is time consuming and time limited (tours are sporadic, application deadlines nonlinear.) One parent explained, “I didn’t even know that I had turned in my application incorrectly. And nobody notified me of that. Because it was not correct, they just disregarded it completely and we had to start over.” Some parents admitted the complexity of the process and suggested starting it early enough to secure their child’s placement at a desired school. For example, one parent stated, “My child is only in the 1st grade but I am already starting to worry about the high school she is going to go”. Another parent made a similar point by saying that her son “... is 4, so I thought I had plenty of time! But there is a 2-year waiting list. I had no idea!” It was also voiced that the process of choosing a school and getting enrolled is very time consuming even if parents understand the process. For example, another parent confirmed, “You really have to invest yourself into getting information about all the different options. We do have the tools, but we still have to find the time.”

In terms of obstacles to gathering information and obstacles to making a school choice, four themes emerged: *Unclear and conflicting admission guidelines*, *confusing school-type jargon*, *lack of accessible school information* and *poorly designed websites*. Parents complained that there are unclear and conflicting admission guidelines across and within school systems in Kansas City. Parents pointed out that school applications are due in different months, admission decisions are made at different time points and sometimes admissions guidelines change during the admission process.

For example, one parent explained, “I find it confusing, really confusing. We were thinking of applying to [elementary school] and then it turned out we missed the deadline because it was so early compared to all of the other groups.” This problem, for example, leads some parents to enroll in multiple schools, which lengthens waiting lists and leaves parents without a clear answer until the last days before school begins. A parent explained, “So, you get accepted into 3 schools, you get to choose one of them. And then suddenly the other 2 schools have openings ... so you can be the 35th on the list and still get in.” Another parent added, “That ... brings a lot of turmoil, then you ditch [that school] and it opens up for somebody else, and they already committed somewhere else too.”

Another piece of information that is missing (and creates obstacles) is related to the different definitions of schools and terminology about schools across the city. Parents find signature, charter, neighborhood, immersion and Montessori schools difficult to understand. This makes it unclear which schools parents are eligible to enroll their children in. It can become so stressful that parents sometimes feel they “need a social worker to assist them.” Although the information about types of school is available to some, parents insist, “It is not so obvious to all of us. So, [provide] a really nice breakdown of: this is what Montessori is; this is what charter is.” The qualitative results suggest that while having choice is positive, parents find “these alternative types of schools and ... different philosophies of education overwhelming [to me].” Hence, even parents who know what school they want to enroll their children in still feel insecure about understanding the options, the availability of placement, having enough time to submit the paperwork and making sure their children get into the schools of their choice.

Finally, an important piece of information that seems to be unavailable or difficult to find is detailed online information about schools such as teacher turnover rates, teacher experience, and information about the school’s curriculum. Parents want this information readily available as they decide which school best fits their children’s needs.

A parent explained, “I don’t know that I would go to a website; we would probably learn only basic stuff.” In addition to missing information online in general, poorly designed school and building websites were a major obstacle for parents. Parents reported that these websites are typically difficult to navigate and that almost

none of the information they wanted (curriculum, teacher information, layout of the school day, etc.) was presented in an up to date, detailed and user-friendly manner. A parent explained, “I think websites are another source of information. I cannot say they [school district and building sites] were great.” One parent added, “you cannot find anything without going in 15 loops.”

Other Barriers

To better understand the implications and constraints of the school choice process we asked parents to identify obstacles and barriers they faced when selecting schools and enrolling their children. One theme emerged: *financial constraints*.

Financial constraints stood out as a major obstacle that impacts the selection of schools for many of the respondents. Parents have a wide array of choice yet are sometimes limited based on their financial situation and available resources. It was repeatedly mentioned that the cost of private schools and limited scholarship opportunities exclude those options for respondents across the sample. One parent pondered, “Do I have to really pay for education, like really-really pay for education? Do I have to sell my house for a good education?” While another parent admitted, “I don’t think we could ever afford [private school], but if we did, that would mean there is no college fund left, and then what do you do?” Another parent insisted, “Take out all the private schools just based on [cost].”

In addition to the cost of tuition some parents made the point of not being able to pay for the after-school programs. “My kids have never attended the after school programs, it’s like \$40 per week, times that by 4; no you are going home.” Other parents still did not understand that specialty schools (e.g. Montessori, immersion) were tuition free therefore they did not attempt to enroll in those programs. Further, some parents expressed that the distance of the school (even if there were buses available) was not appealing. Perhaps financial fragility means that if parents have car problems, have jobs with less access to paid time off, or work later hours they may not be able to get to the school in times of emergency or to engage with teachers regularly. One parent explained, “It needs to be a straight shot for buses, because if something happens to my car, I need to be able to get to my child.”

Factors Influencing School Choice

The findings suggest that multiple factors drive the parental school choice decision-making process. These factors are influenced by parents' understanding of the landscape, access to information and the individual needs of the students. When looking across the qualitative data to determine factors that impact most parents' choices, seven themes emerged. Specifically: *Academic quality and school reputation, Interaction and open communication with teachers, School environment and atmosphere, Location of living, Parental involvement, Diversity and Extracurricular activities.*

Reputation, one of the themes that surfaced during the conversations, is a broad and sometimes vague concept because parents can imply different meanings to what comprises a school's reputation. Although reputation is based on a mix of many factors itself, we will discuss those most commonly discussed across the qualitative data. For example, the respondents repeatedly emphasized that they seek information about a school's reputation first through their research of the school-level performance, analysis of print, television, and social media coverage, and by asking other parents for feedback about certain schools. People generally try to avoid schools with a "bad reputation" as determined by perusing those sources. Some indicators of the "right reputation" were "top ranked schools (e.g. visiting ranking websites), and the percentage of students that went on to college..." Some indicators of a bad reputation were negative media coverage of school (e.g. fist fights among

students), loss of accreditation and poor building test scores. Many respondents agreed, "All schools need to think about their reputation...and word of mouth goes a long way." Complicating the ways in which "reputation" is communicated, some parents relied on prior knowledge of the Kansas City school landscape as former students. This contributed to their understanding of the reputation of schools in Kansas City. One parent explained, "growing up in Kansas City, if you went to [high school] you were smart, basically." The qualitative data illustrates that schools have maintained certain reputations for decades, while new schools enjoy no such baggage. For a number of our respondents, the public school system has a low reputation that makes many parents seek other options instead of choosing a neighborhood school. A parent explains the issue: "There is this ethos of negativity with the Kansas City Public Schools for several decades, and I think there are changes happening, but a lot of people ... tend to focus on what they have heard, the negative aspects." Conversely, parents who are new to Kansas City sometimes have little experience with school choice in general. One parent quipped, "I went to the same school from kindergarten through 12th grade. When we moved here, I went downtown [board of education] and did everything by the book, so to speak. They told me [elementary school] is your neighborhood school."

Another theme, academic quality, emerged across the focus group discussions. Participants defined academic quality by referring to what they expect schools to provide, including such factors as challenging, "aggressive" curriculum or academic rigor, educational outcomes (proficiency and graduation), maintenance of accreditation, high quality of teachers and high test scores. It is important to note, not all parents claimed that their current school demonstrated academic quality. The following responses provide perspective of the parents' perceptions about the importance of academic quality and a school's reputation of providing academic quality:

[Parents] like the rigorous work ... and that is the reason why they stay, because their students do very well. Some places like [public high school] and [charter K-12]..... all these local colleges, they know what the academic rigor is. I would love to see a really robust mix of academics, and like whether it's math, science, English, the arts, any of that, with real life skills.

[Parents] want the school that will prepare the child the best... with accelerated programs in school. We had a child that was really advancing at a high level in preschool and was reading on first and second grade level going into kindergarten. So ... where do you put your child so they continue to excel?

Look at the charter schools, and you still have to look at how they are actually teaching the kids. Some Charter schools don't actually instill academics.

I think school rank, academic ranking, and test scores - that was something that I always looked up.

A number of focus group participants spoke about the importance of open communication with teachers and school staff and the value of interactions between teachers and students as well as families. Whether it was grounded on their positive or negative experiences, parents wanted their children and themselves to be able to easily reach out to their teachers and get feedback or advice without making an appointment and waiting for several days. "I called the [local school] to talk to the teachers ... and it will be 3 or 4 days later before getting answers. At [current school] you got [teachers] numbers already locked in the phone. It's easy to talk with teachers." Parents appreciate building relationships with the teachers and being able "to come in the classroom and pop up ... send an email or call when needed." For the majority of parents it seems really important to get information from schools timely and be in constant contact with the teachers. A group of parents complained about a new rule that no longer allowed parents in the classroom. One parent explained, "If you want to visit your kid's class on a certain day, you couldn't ask the teacher and you can only come to have lunch with your child once a month." This limited access was not viewed favorably by parents and in some cases communicated that parents were not welcomed.

Another facet of communication described in the discussions related to interactions between teachers and students. Parents appreciate open and friendly relations between teachers and students. One parent described her child's school: "There is a teacher at each door and as the kids are walking out, they are giving them high fives and they know every kid's name!"

Conversely, one parent reported, "I looked at the website and the language was harsh. It sounded like students and parents were being admonished publicly."

Another key aspect was school environment and atmosphere. This factor overlaps with the quality of teachers and adds more weight to academic quality as well. There was some variability in how parents addressed those concepts with majority implying safety, positive learning environment and feeling welcomed and comfortable as important characteristics of the school environment. Parents confirmed that they "like to go visit the schools, and make sure ... that will let you right in there. It let's you know how comfortable it feels." Discipline and behavior issues were listed as part of a positive school environment. A parent explained, "For me, one of the most important things was whether the children were politely behaved. A positive atmosphere (quiet, orderly, friendly) implies that "teachers genuinely care about your student." Parents also commented that this orderliness also demonstrated that the students respected the teachers.

Location of living, proximity to schools and transportation availability are important factors for parents according to our group discussions as well. Parents fear they may need to relocate to make sure they provide good education opportunities to their children. One parent explained, "We wanted to live in the city but we wanted our kids to have a good education." Some parents consider living in the city and obtaining a good education as in conflict with one another.

One parent was told, "Oh you live around here; you can't send your kids to these schools. And I was like, okay, I better start doing research." Other parents believe they have good choices but location is still a factor. A parent explained, "We preferred [school] but it was far away from where we live. It's strange to drive my 5 year old all the way downtown and leave him there all day." In this case, transportation is less of a barrier and more of a factor in school choice. Parents may have the resources to send their children to any public school within the boundaries but seem to prefer being closer to home as long as the choice close to home is considered acceptable.

About half of our participants found the opportunity for their involvement in school activities as "a very important" reason for them when considering school options.

Many parents who participated are willing and eager to come to the classroom to assist teachers and also witness what is happening in the classroom. A parent commented that she liked with schools "want parents to come up and ... assist ... in the classroom or with extracurricular things like school dances."

Some parents confirmed their satisfaction because "parent involvement was big." This factor seemed to contribute to a school being perceived as having a positive school environment. Parental involvement can also help "if there is a problem with the teacher or they are not learning or whatever. Step in and see why and what can be done." Being involved in school activities is part of parental responsibilities according to the comments. Another parent said, "You can't just rely on ... you can't just drop them off at school and say, "Okay, just educate them. You have to be part of it." When asked about an ideal school one parent summarized as follows: "My ideal school for my child would be ... it's basically parent and teacher involvement, just the whole school being involved."

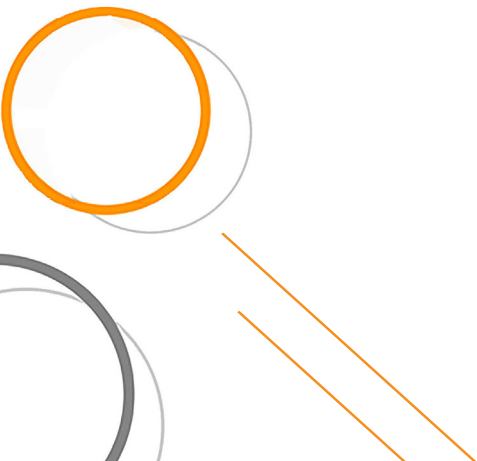
In addition to parent involvement, many respondents voiced the importance of diverse schools. Diversity for many respondents referred to demographics, socioeconomic status and gender differences. One parent conveyed her satisfaction with the increased gender diversity at schools. "I love, as far as gender, ... I grew up in an elementary school with 1 male teacher and love seeing that there are male teachers here and a female principal."

Some emphasized the role of demographic composition in their school choice process considering it to be the most significant choice factor. "That was something I always looked up – the diversity. I wanted a diverse school!" For others it was important because the child "... is multicultural so we wanted the diversity along with that." Respondents emphasized that they wanted to see not only "the diversity of student population" but "the diversity of the staff" as well. It is important to note that several parents expressed not wanting to send their children to a school where everyone looked different. White families generally did not want to attend schools that were majority students of color and African American families did not want to attend schools where their children were one of few black students. For example, one parent explained, "I don't feel that [charter school] is diverse enough (mostly white children)" while another parent explained, "I don't feel that [public school] is diverse enough (mostly black children)." For parents who speak another language, demographics of the school were even more of a concern. One parent explained, "This school was my only option because I know that translators are available and some of the teachers speak my language."

In addition, economic and cultural diversity intersect, creating another factor that parents consider with choosing a school. One family was even willing to relocate because they

... wanted a school that was diverse for our children, a real world school. Not just like a bubble sort of world. ... My [son's] elementary school did not have any kind of cultural or socioeconomic diversity in it. So, I bought my house within the [public school] boundaries ... because of the diversity.

A third of the respondents acknowledged the importance of after school extracurricular activities among the factors that impact their school choices. They investigate what "support classes" are provided by schools, such as, "Physical Education, music, art - all those sort of things - your extracurricular activities." Parents expressed satisfaction with their current schools because they offer children opportunities to be active "in sports and stuff like that, instead of being on the streets." Those who were still in the process of selecting a school for the next year preferred schools where "I know [the child] is going to get a good education, and he is going to get air time, because I know he is going to do football or track, some schools are more scouted than others."



Parents shared that one of the “number one” questions they ask when exploring school options would be if a school offers “arts program, media programs, robotics, things like that.” A concern was voiced that, “Some of the charter schools don’t have as many extra-curricular activities to choose from, such as sports and things like that.”

This parent’s description of an ideal school summarizes the most important factors the participants of our research study consider when making school choices for their children:

A perfect school... if there ever was one ... for me would be something with some extra-curricular activities. And a perfect school would be with academics, nice teachers and nice people, flowers ... the good teachers, the high class teachers, the good principle, the nice way it looks on the outside and inside. It is comfortable for students. A lot of good perks ... all the good stuff.”

Parent Utilization of Show Me KC Schools

Parents are using Show Me KC Schools to find information about all schools in one location. Among those who cited using it (approximately half of the focus group population) they found it convenient and well-designed. One parent shared, “the website was a huge help for us because it gave us the chance to kind of put down the things we were looking for and search according to that criteria.” Another parent recalled, “How did you get your kid into that school, how much does it cost...people don’t know anything about anything so I tell them; visit Show Me KC Schools website!” Other services used by parents familiar with the organization were the school tours and the school fair, although the school fair was less well known. Parents explained that they learned about Show Me KC Schools often from the school they attended but for some it was too late to use the services (having already chosen a school).

RESULTS SYNTHESIS

Synthesis of the qualitative and quantitative results of this research study shows that the two data sets mostly converge. Our results revealed specific patterns of how parents obtain information about available school options, the decision making process they apply, factors that influence their decisions, and how parents utilize the Show Me KC School website. The findings are summarized below.

Parents who participated in the focus groups most often obtained information about schools in Kansas City by word of mouth. The survey results complement this finding. Parents most often obtained information from parent networks (90.1%), community networks (85.8%), and parent-student networks (83%). Touring schools and conducting online research such as using the Show Me KC Schools websites were also most often used as sources of information. The survey results were again complimentary with in-person visits (90.8%) and websites (81.2%) as top sources of information. Internet searches also included school district, school building and school ranking websites. The analysis of the most numerous codes showed that the most helpful sources of information were school tours, word of mouth, and online searches. The quantitative data results were similar with in school visits ($M=2.69$) and word of mouth, as defined by hearing from other parents ($M=2.63$), being the most useful ways of gathering information. A number of parents suggested avoiding the news media because of their predominantly negative coverage but engaged in school tours instead because the information gathered through the word of mouth could be subjective.

The information that is still missing or seems confusing pertains to clear guidelines on admission including enrollment dates and processes (i.e. required paperwork and submission instructions) and clarity of school-type jargon among the schools in Kansas City. The quantitative data revealed that missing information included academic performance and achievement data, school rankings and comparisons, and available school options. Specifically, parents need more clarity about the differences between signature, neighborhood, charter, and immersion schools.

Multiple obstacles that parents faced while gathering information and going through the enrollment process made it hard to determine which schools were the best.

Conflicting admission guidelines, confusing enrollment processes including waitlists (ex. might be admitted to one school and be on the waitlist for another) and poorly designed websites (particularly that of KCPS) that are difficult to navigate and lack necessary, detailed, and up to date information were the most common reported obstacles. The quantitative data further revealed that some parents did not have a knowledgeable network to obtain information from, and limited ability to tour schools (a preferred method of obtaining information about schools).

Other barriers that the respondents found important were financial constraints and transportation availability. Some choices (ex. private schools) were not considered because of the cost. The location of the families and the available transportation options were the second most significant obstacle for the families engaged in the school choice process.

Qualitative analysis of the most important factors impacting parents' school choice decisions revealed that academic quality and school's reputation play the most important role in the decision making process. These factors are interrelated and many respondents connected reputation to academic quality, implying that challenging curricular and academic rigor were the markers of quality. In addition to academics, parents expressed the need for interaction and open communication between teachers and parents. The other significant factors were school environment and atmosphere, location of living, parental involvement, student, teacher and staff diversity, and the availability of extracurricular activities. The survey revealed

similar emphasis on academics. When asked to identify the top three factors influencing their school choice, parents identified teacher quality, parent involvement and academic performance.

Factor analysis to the question about the most important factors that affected school choice revealed patterns in parental responding. For example, parents who rated teacher quality high also rated curriculum, academic performance, and safety high. Parents who rated transportation high also rated extracurricular activities and social services high. The results suggest that there may be clusters of parents who emphasize different factors. The factor analysis, however, also confirms that academic factors are most influential in impacting choice.

Finally, Show Me KC Schools was a resource that many of the parents in our study were aware of, used and had positive reactions about. Parents asked for more advertising about the resource and to implement school comparison tools. The recommendations section has more specific guidance pertaining to this study's findings.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Research results suggest that the vast and changing school landscape in Kansas City provides a variety of choices that families can benefit from, but includes a lack of consistent requirements, clear explanations and guidance throughout the school choice. The cumbersome nature of choosing a school causes confusion and sometimes dissatisfaction with the final choice. After carefully considering both the qualitative and quantitative data, our team has developed four broad, yet detailed recommendations including next steps.

Recommendation #1

Kansas City would benefit from a coordinated, up-to-date, detailed information system for parents navigating school choice.

In our study, parents consistently articulated the need for more coordinated and detailed information about school choices. This is no easy task and certainly there is no singular strategy to address this need. Reflecting on the data collected for this study and work done in other cities, our research team provides the following recommendations for next steps:

- ***Develop a common language and understanding of common school choice concepts.*** The array of school choices in Kansas City is both a blessing and a curse. An important first step to improving the school choice process will be to lay out common language and terms. Creating a resource that defines a signature, neighborhood, Montessori, charter, immersion, private, and parochial school in “Kansas City” terms would be particularly useful. This definition would need to include features that matter to parents such as

1) Is there a special enrollment process for this type of school, 2) Does this school have associated costs (tuition, transportation, extracurricular activities, etc.).

Recommendation #2

Kansas City would benefit from greater access to schools. Schools in Kansas City exist in a dichotomy of sorts: some with a long and storied history while others promise innovation and change from an old guard. Parents who participated in our study discussed the consequences of having a long history as well as the uncertainty of entrusting their child’s education to a new school without data to support its promises. During our focus group

sessions, most parents learned something new about Kansas City schools and most of the participants wanted more detailed information. Our team suggests this next step:

- ***Develop a mechanism that allows parents access to school buildings as well as performance, curriculum, teacher, and discipline data (or lack thereof).*** The survey results indicated and the focus group data corroborated that parents want first-hand information about schools (e.g. school tours, open houses) and data about teacher quality and academic rigor. Parents also indicated that curriculum and safety were important. Organizations in Kansas City would meet parents’ needs by providing access to this information in a convenient, transparent, easily understood format as parents evaluate school choices and make informed decisions about best school fit.

Recommendation #3

Kansas City would benefit from a dynamic and citizen led parent education initiative.

The Kansas City school landscape is vast and growing, therefore organizations should empower parents to navigate, differentiate between and impact schools trajectory when necessary. Our focus group research indicated that some parents can access information about high teacher quality, for example, while others are less equipped. Some parents are resourced to gain access to schools while others are less resourced.

- ***Create a comprehensive parent education and engagement initiative that aims to impact the disproportionality of parent knowledge in Kansas City.*** Organizations should develop tools that parents can easily access that help them identify and evaluate the characteristics of

schools parents say they are looking for (rigorous academics, well-rounded curriculum, great teachers, etc.). Parents expressed difficulty in deciding “the best” school from schools that are of less quality. Educating Kansas City parents seems an integral part of educating their children.

Recommendation #4

Kansas City benefits from Show Me KC Schools and has the opportunity to build on it. A large number of participants in our study were familiar with Show Me KC Schools. The city should utilize the popularity and momentum of Show Me KC Schools to further improve knowledge of the Kansas City school landscape and parents’ ability to effectively navigate it. Whenever possible, we should leverage the success of Show Me KC Schools to decrease confusion of available resources and the need for additional information clearinghouses.

END OF REPORT. Questions about this report or the appendices can be directed to schoolsmartkc.org



