

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to examine the factors that influence parents' decisions to enroll and retain their children in charter schools. The number of charter schools in the United States has grown significantly over the past fifteen years despite evidence that academic performance is lacking and, at best, matches that of traditional public schools; therefore, the importance of this study lies in understanding the motivations for charter school enrollment. In the fall of 2006, the Texas Education Agency commissioned a survey of charter school and traditional school parents. Two hundred nineteen charter school parents and 218 traditional public school parents were interviewed by telephone and asked to describe the importance of fourteen school characteristics. This study will use parental attitudes and priorities towards school characteristics to help determine what motivates parents to pull children out of traditional public schools and enroll them in charter schools. Given that, as part of the survey, parents were asked to rate their satisfaction with seventeen different aspects of schooling after enrollment, I will follow up with an analysis of how parents perceive the charter school post-enrollment.

Introduction

Charter schools are locally operated elementary and secondary public schools that are freed from many of the bureaucratic rules and regulations of traditional schools. For example, charter schools often do not have to abide by a state's teacher hiring regulations or curriculum and pedagogical requirements. These schools operate under contract with a chartering authority (typically a local school board or the state's educational agency) and in exchange for regulatory freedom high-performance standards are enforced. The appeal of such schools is that alternative operating and teaching methods may be used in order to provide a stimulating and effective learning environment different from that of regular public schools (Brint 2006). Although much research has been conducted regarding charter schools, studies examining academic performance have dominated the literature; little light has been shed on the value-prioritization part of the charter school enrollment process. Studies have shown that charter school parents are more likely to be very satisfied with their child's school than traditional public school parents. However, it has also been shown – quite conclusively – that the large majority of charter schools do not perform significantly better or worse than their neighboring regular public schools, even though enhanced performance is a central tenet of the pro-charter stance (American Federation of Teachers 2004; Carnoy et al. 2005; Zimmer and Buddin 2006; Hanushek et al. 2006; Loveless 2002; Zimmer and Buddin 2006). Therefore, this study attempts to answer the following question: if perceived academic performance is identified as a significant factor affecting charter school enrollment, then why do parents enroll and keep their children in these schools when academic performance does not improve? With this in mind, the proposed study will analyze a

survey of Texas charter school parents in order to try and provide some answers to the research question.

Review of the Literature

Charter schools are a fairly recent addition to the American educational landscape. In 1992, the first charter school opened in Minnesota and today 40 states and Washington D.C. have enacted charter legislation serving roughly 1.2 million students in 4,100 schools across the country (Center for Education Reform 2007). Proponents claim that charter schools provide benefits on many levels – for students, parents, and the community as a whole. Students are said to benefit from a stimulating learning environment provided by unique management and curricular characteristics. Parents (especially lower-class and minority parents) benefit by being able to act on their dissatisfaction with traditional public schools or specific educational desires by choosing which school is best for their child. Fundamental to the charter school concept is that these schools are supported by public money but are not required to follow the same rules and regulations that apply to traditional public schools. Depending on the state and how much regulatory freedom is granted, charter schools are generally exempt from most state and district educational laws, allowed significant fiscal autonomy, and are not subject to a district's collective bargaining agreements with teachers unions when hiring. However, the degree of regulatory freedom varies greatly from state to state. For example, California's charter law stipulates that its charter schools are automatically exempt from most state and district educational laws and have complete fiscal autonomy. Texas also exempts its charter schools

from most laws and regulations but they have limited fiscal and no legal autonomy. Thus, the ability of charter schools to operate with these supposed regulatory and curricular freedoms depends on the particular state law (CER 2007).

Also, communities benefit because the introduction of free-market-like forces on the local school system brings pressure on all schools to perform better since parents will be looking for and choosing the best schools (Zimmer and Buddin 2006). Overall, the hope behind charter schools is that greater choice for parents will translate into academic benefits for students by putting them in schools freed from bureaucratic demands and limitations. This notion is closely related to Milton Friedman's advocacy (1962) of school vouchers as a means to introduce benefits of the free-market into education. According to Friedman, introducing private-sector competition into education will help bring about innovation and the motivation to perform at a high level on behalf of district schools. Parents, acting as customers, will seek out the best schools and force others to adapt to successful practices or suffer the consequences of low enrollments and funding. Helping parents cover the cost of private school tuition with vouchers would considerably reduce the role of government in education since schools would theoretically be free to operate without significant oversight and regulation.

Although Friedman considered vouchers to be the best way to improve education, charter schools operate under many of the same basic principles. Like unsuccessful private schools, charter schools are at risk of being shut down if certain performance goals are not met. This level of accountability is part of the trade-off between school districts and charter schools. In return for increased freedom from state and district regulations, charter schools must demonstrate academic success (defined usually as performance on state administered exams or some other agreed arrangement between the chartering authority and the school).

Opponents, on the other hand, claim that charter schools will have adverse effects for racial segregation and *skimming* off the best students. Perhaps the biggest concern, though, is whether or not less educated and working-class parents will be able to choose schools accurately and for academic as opposed to non-academic reasons (Hanushek et al. 2006; Henig 1998; Kleitz et al. 2000; Ogawa and Dutton 1994; Renzulli and Roscigno 2007; Schneider and Buckley 2002; Schneider et al. 1998; Teske and Reichardt 2006; Teske and Schneider 2001). Exacerbating already racially divided school systems (particularly in urban districts) is of concern when giving parents greater agency in school choice. Although school choice has long since existed in the form of residential location, the more recent developments including vouchers, charter schools, magnet programs, and open-enrollment policies have given parents an unprecedented level of control over which schools their children attend. In an effort to identify and target charter school clientele, many states have included provisions in charter legislation that requires the schools to serve traditionally at-risk students where applicable (i.e. groups that have high drop-out levels, disciplinary problems, or high teen pregnancy rates). For example, Connecticut's law states that during the approval process, priority is given to schools that would serve traditionally at-risk students and districts with a 75% or more minority population (CER 2007).

Many studies have been conducted regarding what parents feel are important aspects in schools, however, studies asking parents specifically what they look for when choosing a charter school are less abundant. Most importantly, the literature on parental demands is varied and identifies a few key trends. The most common result from studies on general parental criteria for schools is that regardless of race, income level, or socioeconomic status, academic factors like high test scores, college matriculation rates, and teacher quality are important aspects of schools (Schneider and Buckley 2002; Schneider, Teske, and Marschall 2000; Teske and Schneider

2001). One study by Vanourek et al. (1998) found that small class size and high standards were the most cited reasons for which parents chose charter schools.

Even though academic characteristics are in high demand by all parents, other factors play a significant role as well. In a widely cited study, the Carnegie Foundation (1992) found that the availability of day care, sports options, and other non-academic factors weighed heavily on parents' choices in schools. When income and education level of the parent is taken into consideration, even more nuances emerge from the literature. For example, Schneider et al. (1998) found that contrary to charter school critics, low-income and minority parents preferred that schools perform the core functions of educating children in a safe environment more so than white and high-SES parents. Furthermore, white parents with high levels of education were most likely to prefer that schools have good values and diversity while downplaying safety and discipline more so than any other group. Ogawa and Dutton (1994) note that parents using school choice (not just charter schools, but also vouchers, magnet programs, etc.) base their decisions on a variety of factors that also differ by race – white parents were most likely to choose based on religious values while African-American parents preferred academic and curricular reasons, and Latinos most often cited location of the school and discipline.

In a study comparing parents of children in charter schools to parents who opted for other forms of school choice (particularly private schooling), Teske and Reichardt (2006) found that charter parents were most likely to choose based on academic factors rather than values, safety, and school culture. The most important feature of this study is that Teske and Reichardt surveyed only parents whose income was \$50,000 or less. Further complicating the matter, Kleitz et al. (2000) found in a survey of Texas charter school parents that regardless of race or income level, parents ranked educational quality, class size, safety, location, and presence of

student's friends in the same order of importance (with educational quality being the most important). Their most interesting finding though, is that Hispanic and African-American parents found school safety more important than white parents. The authors attribute this difference in concern for safety to the fact that minority students are more likely to come from previous schools where safety issues were a significant concern.

The general trend in parental criteria for school choice shows that despite race, income level, or SES, most parents will verbally report that academic factors are important or very important to their notion of a good school. However, differing racial and SES groups hold certain characteristics to be the most important and/or absolutely fundamental to their school choice. Of particular note here is that racial makeup of the student body is consistently shown to be an insignificant factor to parents of all racial groups and income levels (Schneider and Buckley 2002; Teske and Schneider 2001) - an issue which will be addressed below.

Minority and lower-SES parents are more likely than White and high-SES parents to consider these academic factors as *the* most important and fundamental criteria by which to judge a school, but all racial and SES groups are likely to say that academics are important to some degree. What are noticeably underreported by parents on just about every survey are the racial characteristics of potential schools. While Schneider et al. state "this low percentage [of parents acknowledging race as an important factor] most likely underrepresents the true level of parental concern, we nonetheless believe that it does signify the declining role of race as a motivation for choice" (1998: 498). However, parents have demonstrated through enrollment behavior that race does play a significant part in choosing schools based on the racial similarities that student bodies exhibit to the parents' race. As Schneider and Buckley (2002) note, most parents used an informational website to learn about charter schools with lower percentages of

Black students and Teske and Schneider (2001) found that high-SES and White parents enroll their children more often in charter schools with fewer minority and low-income students. Finally, the role of policy structure is also at play here as many states have implemented preferential treatment for charter school applications that promise to serve high minority and/or at-risk populations. Also, many urban parents seeking a charter school may be forced to enroll in a racially segregated school by default since most urban inner-cities are heavily populated by minorities alone.

A final issue to consider when discussing the literature on parental criteria for school choice is that different kinds of populations are used to describe all parents of school choice. Many studies survey parents who use school vouchers, charter schools, magnet programs, open-enrollment programs, or private schools as a means to describe the general term of school choice (Ogawa and Dutton 1994; Schneider and Buckley 2002; Schneider et al. 1998; Teske and Reichardt 2006; Teske and Schneider 2001). The authors of these various studies take general data on various forms of school choice and apply them to specific types such as charter schools. There has also been a significant amount of research using data collected from charter school parents only (Hanushek et al. 2006; Kleitz et al. 2000; Vanourek et al. 1998; Zimmer and Buddin 2006). The same trends have emerged using data from either just charter school parents or parents who have utilized various types of school choice. Renzulli and Roscigno speak to the flaws of research on charter schools by saying “Clearly, in the case of charter schools, the legislative cart has been put before the empirical horse” (2007: 33). Furthermore, Schneider and Buckley state that “Given the stakes involved in this debate, the empirical evidence about parental preference is actually less than compelling, and, more importantly, the evidence is often determined by the research method used” (2002: 135).

The literature regarding what parents demand from traditional public schools is not as uniform in methodology and results in no clear trends, unlike studies of parents choosing charter schools. For example, the Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools (Rose and Gallup 1993) asked adults to rate the top five goals that American public schools should work towards. The top goal was to develop students as citizens while the least important goal reported by respondents was academic competency. Also, in 1991, parents said that student discipline was just as important as teacher quality and curriculum (Gallup). A 1989 study of British parents found that emphasis on schoolwork, discipline, and teaching method were among the issues that received the highest percent of "highly important" rankings while extracurricular activities and curriculum were among those issues rated as least important (Glover 1992). Further complicating things, a study by Coldron & Boulton (1991) resulted in the conclusion that happiness of the child was a crucial consideration when choosing K-12 schools and the importance of academic criteria was significantly minimized.

However, one study found similarities to that of charter parents when analyzing parental demands of teacher qualities. Jacob and Lefgren (2007) found that parents in majority low-income schools requested that their children take classes with teachers who rated high on the ability to raise student achievement but rate low on student satisfaction. Conversely, parents in schools where most students have families with high incomes, the teachers most often requested were those who rated highly as being able to provide an enjoyable classroom environment, higher than their ability to produce student achievement on standardized tests.

It is difficult to draw any meaningful conclusions from the literature on parental criteria for selecting traditional public schools, mainly because the literature is too sparse and varied in the methodology. Being a controversial part of educational reform, charter schools have

received considerable attention and this may be the reason more research is available regarding why parents actively seek out these kinds of schools.

Theory

Theoretical explanations as to why different groups of parents want different things from schools is lacking in the literature. While most studies are quick to put forth survey or interview data showing a difference in the way parents prioritize certain school attributes, they do not go deeper in trying to theorize as to why this may be (Hanushek et al. 2006; Henig 1998; Ogawa and Dutton 1994; Schneider and Buckley 2002; Teske and Schneider 2001; Vanourek et al. 1998). The most compelling theoretical explanations come from Delpit's discussion of race (1995) and Lareau (1989; 2007), Brantlinger, Majd-Jabbari, and Guskin (1996), and Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz's (1996) discussions on class.

One key argument raised by Schneider et al. (1998) is their use of Delpit's cultural conflict theory and applying it to parental school preferences. According to Delpit (1995), racial groups place different levels of importance on certain aspects of schooling. Minorities (specifically, lower-SES minorities) place more emphasis on basic functions of schooling like "discourse patterns, interactional styles, and spoken and written language codes that will allow them success in the larger society" (Delpit 1995: 28-29). Minority parents prefer schools that will impart such knowledge and fundamental skills on their children in a safe environment as a way to make sure these students will have the resources later in life to pass through societal (i.e. white) "gate-keeping points." White and higher-class parents, on the other hand, place

importance on more liberal notions of humanistic values and stimulating social development because they know that their children will be able to successfully navigate through society later on in life, having grown up within the dominant culture. In other words, white parents have the “luxury” of preferring certain aspects of schools while not being overly concerned with high test scores or college attendance rates. The majority of studies that survey charter school parents find support for Delpit’s theory about cultural values (Kleitz et al. 2000; Ogawa and Dutton 1994; Schneider et al. 1998; Teske and Reichardt 2006; Vanourek et al. 1998). Schneider et al. further elaborate by saying “While this debate is most often cast in class terms, as is evident in Delpit’s work, an inevitable racial dimension exists in the debate – that is, whites and racial minority groups may want different things from the schools...” (1998: 492).

Furthermore, a study by Henig (1996) examined transfer requests to magnet programs in Montgomery County, Maryland and found that with the introduction of school choice, more transfer requests were made to schools with few minorities by whites than by minorities. Also, minorities were likely to request a transfer to a school with few whites, suggesting racial and cultural isolation plays a role in parents’ choice of schools. Kleitz et al. (2000) also acknowledge that assuming all parents (minority and non-minority) want the same things out of schools is problematic, even though survey data show relatively similar patterns of parental values. There has been enough evidence (including enrollment patterns in districts with school choice as well as Schneider and Buckley’s (2002) analysis of information-seeking behavior) that speaks to the importance of race in preferential differences.

When discussing parental preference differences along class lines, Lareau’s thesis of “concerted cultivation” on behalf of middle-class parents and “accomplishment of natural growth” by working-class and poor parents appears to be applicable. Although Lareau’s main

focus is on the level of parental involvement based on class, her work can account for some of the differentiation of preferences between middle- and lower-classes. Her earlier work (1989) demonstrates how both middle- and working-class parents value education and wish for schools to provide a solid academic base for their children. Middle-class parents, however, preferred that their children go above and beyond basic academic success to the point where one of Lareau's respondents said "I would like to see them dabble in a number of different fields... Then, maybe somewhere along the line they [will] find out what really turns them on and concentrate on that" (103). On the other hand, most working-class parents wished that their children attended school purely for the explicit function of completing high school and receiving a diploma.

Lareau (2007) elaborates on this thesis by classifying middle-class attitudes toward their children as "concerted cultivation." In this process, parents (black and white) wish to provide a wide range of experiences by enrolling their children in numerous age-specific organized activities that contribute to an emerging sense of entitlement. Working-class and poor parents did not place emphasis on developing their children's special talents and instead, promoted a sense of constraint. It is not too far of a jump to infer that parents want schools to adopt similar ideals in their approach to educating children. Thus, middle-class parents would prefer schools that espouse similar liberal or progressive values of social growth and development of a well-rounded individual. Working-class and poor parents, however, would prefer that schools provide the core academic functions and provide students with the practical skills necessary to be successful in the job market.

Also, Brantlinger, Majd-Jabbari, and Guskin (1996) demonstrate how middle-class mothers preferred that their children go to schools where the curriculum goes beyond basic skills. Values and goals were important ideas to the mothers, so much so that one respondent

said “Theoretically, school is designed to make people aware of themselves; for my children, to make them better people, better citizens. To pass on the culture of the Western world and get a good job” (587). Similarly, Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz (1996) describe how class shapes attitudes towards schools of choice in the United Kingdom. Parents with higher levels of education and more job prestige were more likely to pick schools that were “liberal if not progressive” in their approach to educating students. Working-class parents, on the other hand, were more likely to be concerned with finding simply “good” schools that produced acceptable exam results from its students.

The lack of a follow-up effort on behalf of researchers presents a significant gap in the literature. Previous studies of parental preferences in charter schools or other forms of school choice have taken parents at their word, without an effort to combat social desirability effects that occur in survey questionnaires or interviews (Kleitz et al. 2000; Ogawa and Dutton 1994; Schneider et al. 1998; Teske and Reichardt 2006; Vanourek et al. 1998). This proposed study will hopefully fill this gap by comparing parents’ survey responses for pre- and post-enrollment perceptions. For example, if a parent says that a school’s academic reputation was a very important reason for enrolling their child in a charter school, I will be able to compare that with a later question asking for the level of agreement with related statements. By using questions that ask parents not only what was important when choosing a school, but also how they perceive the school after enrollment, this study will provide a before and after picture of what parents want in a school. It is important to gauge how parents rate their charter school after enrollment in order to provide a measure of why parents are keeping their children enrolled in the school. This aspect of the study will contribute to the literature because of the comparison between why

parents choose charter schools in the first place and why they feel comfortable enough to keep their children enrolled.

Models, Questions, & Hypotheses

This study will use a previously conducted telephone survey of Texas charter school and traditional public school parents in order to answer the research question. Specifically, this study aims to explain what it is about a school that draws in certain parents and keeps them. Is it having high-quality teachers? The pedagogy? The school's moral values? These characteristics and others were measured by the TEA through a 22-item questionnaire and statistical analyses will determine the differences (if any) by race and socioeconomic status. Parents were asked to rate fourteen different factors including location, academic reputation, and class size, among others. In a subsequent question, parents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with seventeen statements including "This school has small class sizes" and "I am satisfied with this school's basic educational program." There are also two open-ended questions where parents are encouraged to list any unmentioned criteria for choice and other thoughts on the charter school in general.

Based on the literature and particularly, Delpit's cultural conflict theory (1995), I hypothesize that white and middle- and upper-SES parents will be more likely to consider liberal, progressive aspects of charter school education (including the teaching of moral values, special attention to individual needs, and small school size) as the most important factors in choosing a charter school. Also, I expect minority and low-SES parents to consider features of

the charter school that are fundamental to basic academic achievement (such as academic reputation, teacher quality, and poor performance at previous school) to be the most important factors. Much like the ideas outlined by Delpit and Lareau, I expect middle-SES and white parents to prefer that a school have liberal values and emphasize diversity and alternative teaching styles because of their desire to transmit middle-class, white values to their children. Alternatively, minority and low-SES parents are expected to desire strong academics the most because of their need to ensure future success for their children in terms of being financially and occupationally successful in a dominant white Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture. And finally, as a non-directional hypothesis, I expect charter school and traditional school parents to differ in their value prioritization of choice criteria and reasons for leaving their children in traditional schools, respectively.

The importance of this study lies in providing additional information regarding charter school parents' preferences as well as hopefully illuminating some of the differences that occur along racial and class lines. As noted above, most of the studies on parental preferences in schooling result in similar trends but each has their own unique finding and none examine why parents leave in or remove their children from charter schools. Furthermore, this study will present an opportunity to get at parents' true feelings and significantly reduce social desirability effects. This will be done by asking parents what factors are important when choosing a charter school as well as what factors were important when deciding to keep the child enrolled in a charter or traditional school (as measured by the question described above measuring the agreement or disagreement with seventeen statements).

A key area not adequately discussed by the literature is the idea that telephone, mail, or face-to-face surveys of parents on school choice criteria may exhibit heavy social desirability

effects. Parents responding to such surveys will most likely feel like they are supposed to value academics and downplay racial demographics or cultural concerns. This is addressed by Schneider and Buckley (2002) who attempt to measure parental preferences by tracking internet search behavior. In this study, Washington, D.C. area parents using an informational website dedicated to providing data and reports on local schools (including charter schools) had their search patterns tracked anonymously in an effort to reduce this social desirability effect found in other research methods. The authors found that parents behaved quite differently than current data on parental criteria show. Parents sought out information on racial makeup of the schools' student body and neighborhood location more so than information about average test scores, teacher quality, or curriculum. These search patterns do not correspond to the literature and survey results regarding parental preferences. In this proposed study, the problem of social desirability effects will be present as a result of using a survey questionnaire. Logistical constraints make the use of this TEA questionnaire the best fit for gauging school preferences of charter school parents. Because of the nature of the questions and the fact that respondents were speaking directly to the interviewers, social desirability was most likely a factor when answering these questions.

Dependent variables include the amount of importance placed on specific school choice criteria for charter school parents and reasons for keeping children enrolled in public schools for traditional school parents. Parents were asked to rate fourteen criteria as *not important*, *somewhat important*, *important*, and *very important*. Specifically, the level of importance placed on nine of the fourteen criteria will be used as dependent variables, with five criteria identified by the researcher as core academic aspects of schooling and the other four as liberal or progressive aspects of schooling. The five core academic criteria are: “academic reputation of

the school,” “good teachers,” “poor performance at previous school,” “dissatisfaction with educational program and instruction at previous school,” and “school’s discipline approach.” The four liberal, progressive criteria are: “the teaching of moral values similar to mine,” “school’s ability to effectively serve my child’s specific educational needs,” “small school size,” and “educational program of the school.” The independent variables for this study are race and SES. Race is defined by question eighteen of the survey with response categories of White, African-American, Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander, Native American/American Indian, and other. SES will be measured by respondents’ reported educational level. Educational attainment is used as an indicator of SES because of the high correlation between the two as well as previous use of this indicator in the literature (Schneider et al. 1998). The unit of analysis will be parents with at least one child who attended a Texas charter school or traditional public school during the 2005-2006 school year. The population for which this explanatory analysis is expected to hold true is all parents in Texas with children attending a charter school or traditional public school during the 2005-2006 school year. Parental choice is defined as the act of a parent enrolling their child in a K-12 school that is not that child’s assigned, traditional public school - in this case, a charter school. Schools of choice include magnet programs, charter schools, private schools, or traditional public schools taking part in an intradistrict choice program.

Hypotheses for this study are guided by the literature reviewed above and address race and class separately as controls when examining the level of importance placed on the criteria.

Hypothesis 1:

White charter school parents will consider liberal, progressive aspects of schooling very important more often than racial minority charter school parents.

Hypothesis 2:

Racial minority charter school parents will consider the core academic aspects of schooling very important more often than white charter school parents.

Hypothesis 3:

Middle- and upper-SES charter school parents will consider liberal, progressive aspects of schooling very important more often than lower-SES charter school parents.

Hypothesis 4:

Lower-SES charter school parents will consider the core academic aspects of schooling very important more often than middle- and upper-SES charter school parents.

Hypothesis 5:

Charter school parents will differ in their perception of all aspects of schooling from traditional school parents.

A key notion that has emerged from the literature is that all parents, regardless of race or class, consider academic factors like teacher quality and average test scores to be important criteria for selecting a school. I expect to find similar results from my analysis of the data, but with the additional relationships between race, SES and importance of enrollment criteria as outlined in my hypotheses. Again, judging from the literature, I anticipate that race strongly influences which types of school choice criteria a parent considers to be the most important while SES should also exhibit a strong influence on the criteria preferred. As discussed by Delpit (1995) and Lareau (2007), race and class, respectively, play important roles in shaping a parent's desire for schools to impart certain kinds of knowledge on their children; and if my

hypotheses are confirmed, these two theories seem to provide the most promising explanations as to why these relationships exist. I also expect that parents who make the choice to enroll their children in a charter school will value liberal and core aspects of schooling differently than parents who remain satisfied enough to leave their children in traditional public schools. However, given the inconclusiveness of the literature on traditional school parents and the mixed demographic characteristics of parents who choose, no direction is hypothesized.

Methods

This proposed study will use responses obtained from the Survey of Charter School and Traditional School Parents from the TEA's 2005-2006 Evaluation of Open Enrollment Charter Schools. The questionnaire was administered in the fall of 2006 by the Texas Center for Educational Research on behalf of the TEA and contains twenty-two questions. The survey questionnaire was administered through telephone (CATI) interviews. Researchers selected a random sample of approximately twenty-five percent of the charter school districts in operation during the 2005-2006 school year. This resulted in 53 charter school districts and 77 charter campuses. Twenty-six charter districts provided parental contact information for the survey. From the data provided by these twenty-six charter districts, researchers randomly sampled 30 percent of the charter school parents to yield a sample frame of 3,243 parents. The telephone survey was administered to a random sample of 219 charter school parents. To get a comparison sample of traditional school parents, researchers identified 116 traditional school districts in geographic proximity to the charter school sample. Researchers then selected a sample of 67

elementary, middle, and high schools, in twelve districts, that were demographically similar to charter schools statewide. Demographic similarity was based on a statewide analysis of charter school students and their ethnicity as well as whether or not they were economically disadvantaged. Nine of the traditional school districts provided parental contact information for the survey. From the data provided by these districts, researchers randomly sampled nine percent of the parents to obtain a sample frame of 3,252. The survey was administered to a random sample of 218 of the traditional school parents.

The parent or guardian most involved in decisions about the child's education was interviewed. The first three questions ask for basic information regarding the enrollment status of the child (is he/she still enrolled, for how long, and do you have any other children attending a charter school). Question four is one of the most crucial to this study because it asks whether fourteen factors were *not important*, *somewhat important*, *important*, or *very important* when parents first decided to enroll their children in a charter school – or, as the question was worded for traditional public school parents, when deciding to keep the child in the assigned public school. The criteria given are: location, academic reputation, school size, disciplinary approach, curriculum, moral values, special needs, good teachers, staff reputation, performance at previous school, dissatisfaction with previous school, recommendations from staff at previous school, recommendations from family or friends, and any other criteria the parent wished to report (open-ended). These criteria are appropriate for this study because they provide a proxy for liberal, progressive qualities in education as well as the core functions of schooling most commonly used throughout the literature. Specifically, the five core academic criteria of academic reputation, dissatisfaction with previous school, poor performance at previous school, good teachers, and discipline approach will allow me to test my second and fourth hypotheses,

while the four liberal, progressive aspects of small school size, educational program, teaching of moral values, and school's ability to serve individual needs will provide a means to test my first and third hypotheses. I will use this question and the level of importance placed on the respective criteria as dependent variables. Question five asks parents what kinds of information sources they used when selecting a school and will not be used in this study.

Question six is also important because it asks parents whether they *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *agree*, or *strongly agree* with seventeen different statements. The statements are: "This school has sufficient financial resources," "I'm satisfied with this school's basic educational program," "I'm satisfied with the instruction offered," "The rate of staff turnover at this school is acceptable," "I'm satisfied with this school's enriched educational programs," "This school has high expectations and standards for students," "This school has small class sizes," "I'm satisfied with the building and grounds of my child's school," "This school provides adequate support services," "Teachers and school leaders are accountable for student achievement," "My child receives sufficient individual attention," "I'm satisfied with the kinds of extracurricular activities offered at this school," "This school emphasizes educational content more than test preparation," "This school regularly keeps me informed about how my child is performing academically," "The charter school meets the needs of my child that were not addressed at his/her previous school," "My child's grades have improved since attending this school," and "My child's TAAS/TAKS scores have improved since attending this school." Agreement or disagreement with these statements provides the opportunity to follow-up or check the validity of parental responses to question four.

Since question six asks for parents' level of agreement on issues corresponding to the criteria of question four (teacher quality, level of instruction, educational program, class size,

individual attention, and academic performance compared to previous school), I will be able to compare professed importance of academic performance, for example, on question four with the level of agreement on question six that “My child’s grades have improved since attending this charter school.” Question seven asks what kinds of activities parents participate in but will not be used for this study. Questions eight through thirteen ask if the parents are aware of simple facts about the school (what is the principal’s name, how many students are in your child’s classes, what grade levels are offered, how many children are in the school, grade your child’s school A-F, and an open-ended question requesting any remaining thoughts on the child’s school). Questions fourteen through sixteen ask about parents’ experiences at previous traditional public schools and will not be used in this study.

The final questions – seventeen through twenty-two – ask for background information about the respondent including race/ethnicity, primary language spoken in the home, education level, household make-up, and annual income. These questions will enable me to provide an analysis broken down by race and SES. The criteria associated with purely academic functions of schooling – high-quality teachers, child’s poor performance at previous school, and overall academic reputation – are hypothesized to be considered *very important* more often by racial minority and low-SES parents than by white and middle- and upper-SES parents. On the other hand, those criteria more associated with progressive, liberal aspects of schooling – school’s moral values, educational program (unique curriculum), and school’s ability to serve individual needs – are hypothesized to be considered *very important* by white and middle- and upper-SES parents more so than by minority and low-SES parents.

The survey was initially conducted by the TEA in order to provide a comprehensive evaluation of parental attitudes towards Texas’ charter schools, however, specific comparisons

between racial/ethnic groups and class indicators were not made for the individual questions. Therefore, this proposed study will take the TEA report one step further and perform a breakdown of certain questions (those involving factors affecting choice and attitudes toward school after enrollment) by race/ethnicity and SES.

Basic descriptive statistics will be identified at first in order to see how the different racial and SES groups answered survey questions. A statistical analysis of the survey responses will then be conducted in order to identify possible trends and test the hypotheses. In order to predict the probability of choosing certain enrollment criteria as *very important*, *important*, *somewhat important*, or *not important*, multinomial logistic regression will be used, with *very important* as the reference category in each of the models. The independent variables race and SES will be used as predictors to demonstrate the effect on choosing the level of importance for the liberal, progressive and core academic enrollment criteria.

First, I will use SES as a predictor on the probability of perceiving the liberal, progressive aspects of schooling as *very important* versus *important*, *somewhat important*, and *not important*. SES will be used again as a predictor, but this time to demonstrate its effect on the probability of choosing core academic functions of schooling as *very important* versus *important*, *somewhat important*, and *not important*. These two models will test my first and second hypotheses, respectively. To test my third and fourth hypotheses, I will repeat the previous two models using the independent variable of race (whites and minorities) instead of SES, with *very important* again being the referent. Finally, to test my fifth, non-directional hypothesis that says charter and traditional school parents will differ in their perception of all aspects of schooling, I will again use multinomial logistic regression to demonstrate the predictive effect of parent-type on choosing all aspects of schooling as *very important* versus

important, somewhat important, and not important. This final model will include both the liberal, progressive and core academic aspects of schooling.

Results

Multinomial logistic regression analyses were performed using SPSS which allowed separate models to be run for each of the hypotheses and their respective criteria (five core academic and four liberal, progressive criteria). For my first hypothesis, racial classification was used as the independent variable to compare whites' and minorities' level of importance placed on liberal, progressive aspects of schooling. In the second hypothesis, race was again the independent variable in order to gauge level of importance placed on core academic aspects of schooling. For the third and fourth hypotheses, SES (as measured by level of education) was used as the independent variable to test the level of importance placed on liberal, progressive and then core academic aspects of schooling, respectively. Finally, charter school and traditional public school parents were compared to see how much importance was placed on *all* aspects of schooling to test this non-directional hypothesis. The response category *very important* was used as the dependent variable's reference category for each of the models. A total of twenty-seven models were run with each containing likelihood ratio tests, pseudo R-square indicators, and parameter estimates to determine correlation, significance, and direction of relationships between the independent and dependent variables.

To test the first four hypotheses, only charter school parents were included in the logistic regression, yielding 207 cases. In the comparison between charter and traditional public school parents, a total of 412 cases were available for analysis. Cases in which the survey respondent refused to answer the question or responded with “don’t know” were removed from the regression and the frequencies for each model are presented in the full outputs located in the Appendix. Tables 1 and 2 present regression results that tested the first two hypotheses, using race as a predictor for liberal, progressive and core academic aspects, respectively. Tables 3 and 4 summarize results testing the third and fourth hypotheses where SES was used as the predictor for liberal, progressive and core academic aspects of schooling, respectively. And tables 5 and 6 present data from tests of the fifth hypothesis where parent-type was used as a predictor for the liberal, progressive and core academic aspects of schooling, respectively. For each table, the odds ratios and model chi-square statistics are presented.

The odds ratio indicates the multiplicative change in odds of being in each response category as opposed to the reference category (in this case, “very important”) per unit change in the independent variable (race, SES, and parent-type). The model chi-square statistic, when significant, shows the null hypothesis may be rejected and that predictor variable(s) are indeed having a significant effect on the dependent variable. All twenty-seven models’ chi-square coefficients were significant at the .001 level. As a final note, reported results are those for the difference between considering a factor *important* as opposed to *very important*. In the case where the parameter estimates for *important* were not significant, the next highest response category was used in comparison to *very important*.

Race as predictor

Race proved to be a significant predictor for all response categories in each of the liberal, progressive aspects of schooling; furthermore, both white and minority charter parents were more likely to consider all of the liberal, progressive aspects *very important* compared to any of the other three response categories. This effect was greater for white parents, though, as being white increased the odds of perceiving “small school size,” “teaching of moral values similar to mine,” “school’s ability to effectively serve my child’s specific educational needs,” and “educational program of this school” as *very important* by a factor greater than that of minority parents.

Table 1. Race & Liberal, Progressive Aspects^a

	Values	Individual Needs	School Size	Educational Program
Minority	0.495**	0.667***	0.157**	0.548**
White	0.345**	0.344**	0.063**	0.314**
Model χ^2	157.482*	167.762*	111.797*	200.08*

* $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .05$

^a For each odds ratio, the reference category is *very important*. In each case, the odds ratio presented here is for the comparison between *important* and *very important*, except in cases where that particular comparison was not statistically significant, in which case the comparison between the next highest dependent category and *very important* was used.

When the odds ratio is less than one, the predictor is decreasing the odds of being placed in the dependent category compared to the referent, but when the odds ratio is greater than one, then the predictor increases the odds of being placed in that dependent category. In the case of

liberal, progressive aspects, the odds ratios for white charter school parents are lower than those of minority parents when looking at *important* versus *very important* (.314 vs. .548 for school’s educational program, .313 vs. .829 for small school size, .345 vs. .495 for moral values, and .344 vs. .667 for serving child’s specific needs). However, when looking at comparisons between *somewhat important* versus *very important* and *not important* versus *very important*, the odds of choosing *very important* are at times greater for minorities, as in the case of “serving child’s specific needs,” “teaching of moral values,” and “school’s educational program.” This indicates a complex picture of parental preferences to be discussed below.

Race was also significant as a predictor in all the models regarding core academic aspects of schooling and, again, all parents were more likely to pick *very important* than any of the other response categories in all core academic aspects except “dissatisfaction with the educational program and instruction at my child’s previous school” (where charter parents chose *not important* more than any other response). Although all parents were more likely to choose *very important*, the odds of doing so were greater for minority parents than white parents for “academic reputation” (.087 vs. .192) and “poor performance at previous school” (.127 vs. .182).

Table 2. Race & Core Academic Aspects^a

	Previous Curriculum	Good Teachers	Poor Performance	Discipline Approach	Academic Reputation
Minority	0.217*	0.465*	0.127*	0.122*	0.087*
White	0.143**	0.361**	0.182***	0.115*	0.192*
Model χ^2	49.325*	248.686*	66.21*	141.173*	140.512*

* $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .05$

^a For each odds ratio, the reference category is *very important*. In each case, the odds ratio presented here is for the comparison between *important* and *very important*, except in cases where that particular comparison was not statistically significant, in which case the comparison between the next highest dependent category and *very important* was used.

Regarding “school’s discipline approach,” white parents exhibited greater odds of choosing *very important* versus *somewhat important* (the comparison to *important* was not statistically significant) while minority parents exhibited greater odds of choosing *very important* when compared with *not important*. For “dissatisfaction with previous school’s educational program and instruction,” the only significant comparison was between *somewhat important* and *very important* in which white parents showed greater odds of considering this aspect *very important* by a factor of .143 to .217. Out of 205 respondents, 137 considered “good teachers” *very important* while 60 considered it *important*, and white parents showed greater odds of considering this factor *very important*.

SES as predictor

In order to measure socioeconomic status, educational attainment was used as a proxy to classify respondents in low-SES, middle-SES, or upper-SES categories. Those respondents who completed high school are labeled as low-SES; those who have taken some college courses but did not complete their bachelor’s degree are labeled middle-SES; and those who completed a bachelor’s degree, took some graduate courses, or completed a post-graduate degree are labeled upper-SES. Educational level was a significant predictor of all four liberal, progressive aspects of schooling, and once again, *very important* was by far the most frequently chosen response category by all parents. However, being of middle- or upper-SES had a greater effect on the odds of considering all of the liberal, progressive aspects of schooling *very important* than being of lower-SES.

Table 3. SES & Liberal, Progressive Aspects^a

	Values	Individual Needs	School Size	Educational Program
Low-SES	0.580***	0.620***	0.146*	0.063*
Middle-SES	0.349*	.571***	0.059*	0.024*
Upper-SES	0.429***	0.484***	0.192*	0.081*
Model χ^2	154.847*	167.355*	106.587*	208.237*

* $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .05$

^a For each odds ratio, the reference category is *very important*. In each case, the odds ratio presented here is for the comparison between *important* and *very important*, except in cases where that particular comparison was not statistically significant, in which case the comparison between the next highest dependent category and *very important* was used.

When analyzing core academic aspects as predicted by educational level, middle- and upper-SES charter parents again are more likely to perceive all five aspects as *very important*. As in the other models, *very important* was the most reported response except for “dissatisfaction with previous school’s educational program and instruction” (where *not important* was the most frequent response). Perhaps the greatest effect was that of educational level on “good teachers,” where upper-SES respondents exhibited greater odds for choosing *very important* in each of the three comparisons (*not important* vs. *very important*, *somewhat important* vs. *very important*, and *important* vs. *very important*).

Table 4. SES & Core Academic Aspects^a

	Previous Curriculum	Good Teachers	Poor Performance	Discipline Approach	Academic Reputation
Low-SES	0.259*	0.053*	0.125*	0.128*	0.114*
Middle-SES	0.133**	0.026*	0.087*	0.086*	0.111*
Upper-SES	0.167**	0.024*	0.273***	0.160*	0.115*
Model χ^2	55.520*	259.039*	67.195*	138.423*	139.308*

* $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .05$

^a For each odds ratio, the reference category is very important. In each case, the odds ratio presented here is for the comparison between important and very important, except in cases where that particular comparison was not statistically significant, in which case the comparison between the next highest dependent category and very important was used.

Parent-type as predictor

The regression models comparing charter school parents and traditional public school parents yielded a larger sample (412 cases) and were run using parent-type as a predictor on all nine aspects of schooling (liberal, progressive and core academic). Similar to the other models, all parents were more likely to consider aspects as *very important*, except for “dissatisfaction with previous school’s educational program and instruction” and “child’s poor performance at previous school” (in both cases *not important* was the most frequent response).

For the “teaching of moral values similar to mine” model, charter school parents showed greater odds of choosing *very important* (when compared to *important* and *somewhat important*) than traditional public school parents by a factor of .459 to .698. Again, the closer the odds ratio is to zero, the greater the odds are of falling in the referent category. The odds for charter parents to consider “educational program” *very important* as compared to *important* and *somewhat important* were greater, in both cases, than those of traditional public school parents. For “small school size,” the odds of charter school parents responding *very important* compared to all other response categories were significantly greater than those of traditional public school

parents. The comparison between *important* and the referent was unique in that it was the only statistically significant comparison out of all twenty-seven models in this study where the independent variable showed a positive effect on the odds ratio of a dependent category. In other words, being a traditional school parent increased the odds of falling in the dependent category (in this case *important*), not the referent. Finally, the model for “school’s ability to effectively serve my child’s specific educational needs” showed that the odds of traditional school parents falling into the *very important* category (compared to *important* as well as *somewhat important*) were greater than those for charter school parents.

Table 5. Parent-Type & Liberal, Progressive Aspects^a

	Values	Individual Needs	School Size	Educational Program
Traditional	0.698***	0.471*	1.756**	0.603*
Charter	0.459*	0.578*	0.667**	0.484*
Model χ^2	293.903*	327.596*	134.627*	415.593*

* $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .05$

^aFor each odds ratio, the reference category is *very important*. In each case, the odds ratio presented here is for the comparison between *important* and *very important*, except in cases where that particular comparison was not statistically significant, in which case the comparison between the next highest dependent category and *very important* was used.

Results for the core academic aspects of schooling were mixed in terms of charter parents and traditional public school parents. As mentioned above, *not important* was the most frequent response for the factors “dissatisfaction with previous school’s educational program and instruction” and “child’s poor performance at previous school.” However, the only significant comparison for both of these factors was between *somewhat important* and *very important*, where traditional public school parents had greater odds of falling into the referent category than

charter school parents. For the remaining core academic aspects, all parents were more likely to respond *very important* than any other of the categories. The odds of charter parents choosing “school’s discipline approach” as *very important* compared to *somewhat important* were greater than those of traditional parents. Conversely, traditional school parents showed greater odds of considering “good teachers” as *very important* compared to *important*. For “academic reputation,” traditional school parents had greater odds of responding *very important* compared to the other three dependent categories.

Table 6. Parent-Type & Core Academic Aspects^a

	Previous Curriculum	Good Teachers	Poor Performance	Discipline Approach	Academic Reputation
Traditional	0.121*	0.343*	0.066*	0.156*	0.691***
Charter	0.200*	0.438*	0.136*	0.120*	0.708***
Model χ^2	113.459*	492.070*	138.304*	266.455*	303.016*

* $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .05$

^a For each odds ratio, the reference category is very important. In each case, the odds ratio presented here is for the comparison between important and very important, except in cases where that particular comparison was not statistically significant, in which case the comparison between the next highest dependent category and very important was used.

Review of hypotheses

The first hypothesis – that white charter school parents would consider liberal, progressive aspects of schooling *very important* more often than minority charter parents – received some support from the multinomial logistic regression models. When comparing the odds of falling into the *important* category as opposed to the *very important* category, being white increased the odds of falling into the reference category (*very important*) for all four

liberal, progressive aspects. However, when comparing *somewhat important* and *not important* to the reference category, minority charter parents displayed greater odds for choosing *very important* for “teaching of moral values similar to mine” and “educational program of this school.”

Hypothesis two – that minority charter parents would consider core academic aspects of schooling *very important* more often than white charter parents – received mixed support at best. Out of the five core academic aspects, only two – “child’s poor performance at previous school” and “school’s academic reputation” – were more likely to be considered *very important* by minority parents than by white parents. The other three aspects – “good teachers,” “dissatisfaction with previous school’s educational program and instruction,” and “school’s discipline approach” – were considered *very important* with greater odds for white parents as opposed to minority parents. Because the literature shows that all parents consider core academic aspects at least *important*, the comparison highlighted in the regression models is between *important* and *very important*, with less attention paid to comparisons of *somewhat important* and *not important*.

Hypothesis three – that middle- and upper-SES charter parents would consider liberal, progressive aspects of schooling *very important* more often than low-SES charter parents – was widely supported by the regression models. On all four aspects, either the middle-SES or upper-SES charter parents had the greatest odds of considering the respective aspect *very important* compared to virtually all other levels of the dependent variable.

Hypothesis four – that low-SES charter parents would consider core academic aspects of schooling *very important* more often than middle- and upper-SES charter parents – received virtually no support from the models. Although these particular regression models had the least

amount of statistically significant comparisons available, those that were significant showed middle- and upper-SES charter parents had the greatest odds of considering each aspect *very important*.

Finally, the fifth hypothesis – that charter school parents would differ in their perception of all aspects of schooling compared to traditional public school parents – was non-directional and therefore was supported in that some trends were identifiable between the two groups. Regarding the liberal, progressive aspects, charter school parents showed greater odds of considering three of the four aspects *very important* compared to *important* (traditional school parents had greater odds of considering “school’s ability to effectively serve my child’s specific educational needs” *very important* compared to *important*). Especially noteworthy was the comparison between the two parent-types on the aspect of “small school size.” As discussed above, this particular comparison showed that traditional school parents actually showed greater odds of remaining in the dependent category *important*, as opposed to every other significant comparison in the entire study where all parents were more likely to choose the reference category.

Looking at the core academic aspects, however, traditional public school parents dominated the odds of falling into the reference category of *very important* compared to *important*. “School’s discipline approach” was the only core academic aspect where charter school parents had greater odds of considering it *very important* as opposed to the highest available significant comparison (in this case *somewhat important*). In the remaining four core academic aspects, traditional school parents had greater odds of falling into the reference category, especially for “school’s academic reputation” where traditional parents displayed such odds at all three levels of comparison.

Charter parent response analysis

Simple crosstabular analyses were also run to compare charter school parents' responses to question four (what factors were important prior to enrollment?) and question six (perception of school post-enrollment) of the survey. This was done using only charter parents' responses for two reasons. First, when the survey was administered, only charter parents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with certain statements in question six while traditional public school parents were excluded. Second, the main purpose of this study is to provide information on the charter school enrollment process from parents' point of view.

As a method to check the validity of parents' responses on question four, answers were compared with the level of agreement on similar statements presented in question six; for example, responses to "good teachers" were compared with the level of agreement for the statement "I am satisfied with the instruction offered." Comparisons were also made between 1) "academic reputation of this school" / "this school has high expectations and standards for students;" 2) "small school size" / "this school has small class sizes;" 3) "educational program of this school" / "I am satisfied with this school's basic educational program;" and 4) "my child's poor performance at his/her previous school" / "my child's grades have improved since attending this school."

For the "good teachers" / "I am satisfied with the instruction offered" model, the majority of charter parents who thought "good teachers" was *important* or *very important* did in fact *agree* or *strongly agree* with the comparison statement. Of the 202 respondents, 96.0% considered "good teachers" at least *important*. Of that 96.0%, 171 charter parents (88.1%) either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the statement "I am satisfied with the instruction offered."

For the “academic reputation of this school” / “this school has high expectations and standards for students” model, most charter parents thought “academic reputation of this school” was at least *important* (88.2%) and also at least *agreed* with the subsequent statement. Of that 88.2%, 162 charter parents (90.5%) *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the comparison statement. Again, charter school parents seem to be matching their preferences with the appropriate school.

As for the “small school size” / “this school has small class sizes” model, similar trends emerged. 82.5% thought “small school size” was at least *important*, and of those charter parents, 93.5% either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the comparison statement. For the “educational program of this school” / “I am satisfied with this school’s basic educational program” comparison, 92.2% of the surveyed charter parents thought “educational program of this school” was at least *important*. Subsequently, 85.3% of those charter parents *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the comparison statement.

Lastly, the “my child’s poor performance at his/her previous school” / “my child’s grades have improved since attending this school” comparison showed similar trends. Although more charter parents chose *not important* (29.6%) than in previous factors, those that considered the first statement *important* or *very important* were a significant portion of the total (65.7%). Also, of those charter parents who considered the first statement at least *important*, 84.7% *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the comparison statement.

Overall, it appears that charter school parents who perceive certain aspects of schooling as *important* or *very important* when choosing a school are satisfied with their school in these areas. On all five comparisons between pre-enrollment priorities and post-enrollment perceptions, charter parents *agreed* or *strongly agreed*, in large percentages, that their schools offer quality instruction, carry high expectations, have small class sizes, offer a quality basic

educational program, and perhaps most importantly, improve grades. Although it would be ideal to compare such perceptions with data on each school, this study can nonetheless conclude that charter school parents are satisfied with their choices. This observation is indicative of a broader trend that charter school parents tend to be more satisfied with their schools than traditional public school parents or parents using other methods of school choice (Gill et al. 2001; Teske and Reichardt 2006; Teske and Schneider 2001). Furthermore, when the charter school parents in the TEA survey were asked to give their charter school a grade of A,B,C,D, or F, 49.3% gave their schools an A, 33.7% gave their schools a B, 11.2% gave their schools a C, and the grades D and F drew just 2.9% each.

Limitations

A few limitations with this study are worth noting, particularly the similarity of responses, survey design, and inability to match charter school performance data with individual respondents. An unanticipated aspect of this study was the frequency with which all parents chose *very important* for all aspects of schooling, when asked what was important when enrolling children in charter schools or keeping children in regular public schools. The majority of aspects (seven out of nine) for each predictor variable exhibited strikingly similar trends where *very important* was by far the most popular response category on average (55.7%), followed by *important* (32.8%), *not important* (6.4%), and then *somewhat important* (5%). However, for “dissatisfaction with previous school’s educational program and instruction,” *not important* drew 35.4% of the responses, followed by *very important* (31.5%), *important* (27.1%),

and *somewhat important* (5.9%). “Child’s poor performance at previous school” had 34.2% of the responses as *very important*, 32.9% for *not important*, 28.5% for *important*, and 4.3% for *somewhat important*. The fact that most of the aspects exhibited similar response rates for each category points to the difficulty in drawing conclusions about the odds for each group choosing a particular dependent category. Since all parents, regardless of any predictor variable, were more likely to consider aspects *very important*, the differences between the odds ratios of each group became very small, although statistically significant. For the vast majority of regression models, the odds ratios all pointed in the same direction and had very similar effects.

This leads to a second weakness in the study – survey design. The 2005-2006 Survey of Charter School and Traditional School Parents was, for all intents and purposes, a good measure of what aspects of schooling parents perceive as important and just how important those aspects are. On the other hand, the particular set-up of questions four and six made it possible for such similarities in the responses. In effect, parents could say they consider every aspect *very important*, whereas a hierarchical ranking system would have forced parents to place certain aspects of schooling above others. This would increase internal validity if the researcher truly wishes to identify value-prioritization among aspects of schooling.

A final limitation is the inability to match charter school and traditional public school performance data with respondents who have children in those schools. Certainly the biggest gap existing in the literature is the effort to check parental survey responses against observed school performance data to see if desires for academic performance are being met. Although this survey did allow for analysis of parental perceptions of schools post-enrollment, the more ideal analysis would be of actual performance data. However, parental perceptions did match up well with professed desires in the five comparisons that were made above.

Discussion

Overall, the evidence points to mixed support for the five hypotheses. While the third hypothesis was widely supported and the fifth, non-directional hypothesis showed clear trends, others lacked solid confirmation from the regression models. Hypotheses using race, SES, and parent type are discussed below along with implications for future charter school policy.

Race The findings from tests of the first two hypotheses indicate that race plays a significant role when determining which factors parents consider to be the most important. The first hypothesis was supported in that white charter parents had greater odds than minority parents of considering liberal, progressive aspects of schooling *very important*. Thus, white charter parents considered moral values, ability to serve specific needs, curriculum, and small school size to be essential features of a charter school with greater odds than minority parents. However, results showed that white charter parents also consider three of the five core academic aspects *very important* with greater odds than minority parents. In effect, race is a significant predictor of importance placed on liberal, progressive aspects but less so for core academic aspects. It is important to keep in mind that all charter parents perceived eight of the nine total aspects to be *very important* more often than *important*, *somewhat important*, or *not important*. This is indicative of the literature - especially for core academic aspects - in that parents typically perceive factors related to academics as at least important, although some show greater tendencies to report them as very important or essential to the decision-making process in choosing a school.

Delpit's cultural conflict argument can be applied here to a degree as race was shown to determine the essentialism of liberal, progressive aspects of schooling; but the idea that core academic aspects of schooling are essential only to minority parents is not supported. Charter parents – white and minority – are interested in sending their children to schools that will provide quality instruction in basic subjects and this should come as no surprise. White charter parents did, however, express more interest in the liberal, progressive aspects which might indicate that, as Delpit argues, they see the primary goal of education as a way to help children “become autonomous, to develop fully who they are in the classroom setting without having arbitrary, outside standards forced upon them”(28). Even though white charter parents appear to be more interested in liberal, progressive aspects of schooling, it is not at the cost of core academic concerns.

SES Using SES (as measured by educational attainment) as a predictor provided similar results compared with those using a racial independent variable. Hypothesis three was strongly validated by the regression models but hypothesis four found virtually no support. Middle- and upper-SES charter parents did appear to favor all four liberal, progressive aspects of schooling with greater odds than those of low-SES charter parents. Contrary to the fourth hypothesis, the middle- and upper-SES parents also favored all five core academic aspects of schooling more so than low-SES parents. This also follows the literature to a certain point, but also shows how important the bedrock functions of schooling are to every parent, not just low-SES parents as was hypothesized. Again, the margins separating low-, middle-, and upper-SES parents' odds ratios were extremely small, so although low-SES parents reported “academic

reputation,” for example, as *very important* with smaller odds than other charter parents, it should be noted that all parents rated most factors very highly.

Parent type The regression models comparing charter and traditional parents indicated interesting trends that provide perhaps the biggest clue as to the reasons behind charter schools’ niche role in the Texas educational system. Charter parents were shown to consider three of the four liberal, progressive aspects of schooling as *very important* with greater odds than traditional school parents. For the core academic aspects, however, traditional school parents had greater odds of considering four out of the five aspects as *very important*. While it’s obvious that charter school parents feel traditional public schools aren’t meeting their children’s needs, maybe some specification has emerged in explaining exactly what charter parents seek in their new schools. If Texas’ traditional public school advocates and policymakers are interested in retaining children who might otherwise opt for a charter school, they might see the results presented here as an indication of where regular public schools are failing to meet these families’ desires.

Implications With charter schools (and the notion of school choice, in general) being such an important issue for those concerned with educational reform, this study has important implications for those on both sides of the charter school debate. Judging by the analysis above, charter parents hold their schools in high regard and see them as meeting the expressed criteria for enrollment. With this in mind, those with a desire for educational reform in the shape of charter schools might see the evidence presented here as just another confirmation of the way regular public schools fail parents and of the solutions that charters offer. Certainly, in a political

environment like Texas where charter schools have been embraced as a free market-based means of educational reform, any perceived failures in the state's public school system will translate into new opportunities to accommodate frustrated parents. However, as the TEA's 2005-2006 Evaluation shows, charter schools are not meeting such demands, at least academic performance-oriented ones. According to the report, while just 4% of traditional public schools were deemed "academically unacceptable" by the TEA, 21% of charter schools received the unacceptable rating. Furthermore, Texas' charter schools were also reported as having lower graduation rates, lower percentages of students who complete the Recommended High School Program, and lower advanced course completion rates for the 2005-2006 school year.

This study leads to different conclusions than those reached in the TEA Evaluation. Although I was not able to match charter school achievement data with the responses from parents with children in those schools, charter parents who said core academic factors were *very important* either *agreed* or *strongly agreed*, overwhelmingly, that their children's grades have improved since attending the charter school. Other post-enrollment perceptions matched up with pre-enrollment demands as well, including the quality of instruction, academic reputation, school size, academic performance, and curriculum. So what is to be made of the professed support of charter schools' academic performance? Without a detailed comparison of observed achievement data and respondent claims, one must take parents at their word. Although this study aimed to reduce social desirability effects by using the post-enrollment perceptions as a check against factors affecting enrollment, one cannot be completely sure that social desirability has been eliminated. Nonetheless, the results of this study indicate that charter schools in Texas are indeed providing a viable alternative to traditional public schools. It would also have been

helpful to get survey data from parents who left charter schools in order to gauge any dissatisfaction with charter school performance.

Texas policymakers might also see these results as an endorsement of the role charter schools can play in meeting parental demands for educational improvement. As Fusarelli (2003) notes, the debate surrounding charter schools is an extremely complicated one where pro-charter legislation has been viewed differently by state officials and is tied in with the voucher movement as well:

“A [Texas] state senator agreed, stating, ‘I think that there is the possibility that they [anti-voucher groups] thought if we’ll let charter schools take hold, the pressure will come off for vouchers and frankly I think they are right... There are a lot of people who would say, ‘Well, look, students have a choice.’ However, at least one state representative thought the political compromise would backfire and would accelerate movement toward a voucher system. He stated, ‘By endorsing charters, they [groups opposed to vouchers] are hastening the end of the education system as a monopoly, a government-run monopoly.’ Accepting charter schools makes it easier to expand into other forms of choice such as vouchers.”

As is evident by Fusarelli’s description of the Texas political climate, the argument for charter schools is often framed in terms of the larger issue of school choice. Although results like those presented in this study may bolster the pro-charter argument, continued proliferation of charter schools and supportive legislation depends on many different factors.

As for the implications of race and SES on charter school demands, it is clear that these two predictors are significantly related to level of importance placed on certain aspects of schooling. While white and minority charter parents reported different levels of importance for liberal, progressive and core academic aspects of schooling, the distinction is still a complicated one. The manner in which responses from all parents were clustered around *very important* for most of the regression models makes it important to not overstate the differences in odds ratios.

White charter parents, did however, place more importance on all aspects of schooling, except for “academic reputation” and “child’s poor performance at previous school.” With the

majority of Texas' charter school students being either African-American (36%) or Hispanic (45%) and whites enrolling in smaller numbers (17%) compared to the statewide public school average (37%), race appears to be playing a significant role in perceptions of traditional public schools' failings (TEA 2007). With this large percentage of minority students enrolling in charter schools and with their professed desire for increased academic performance, once again, the paradox of observed data and parental demands is raised. But, as this study and others have indicated, charter parents report very high levels of satisfaction with their schools and the academic performance of their children.

Conclusion

This study has helped provide an explanation as to what factors parents perceive as important when deciding to enroll their child in a charter school or stay with their traditional public school. While overall support for the hypotheses was mixed, some trends were identified and new questions are available for further research. Specifically, future studies might obtain the necessary data to compare charter school performance data to individual responses. Also, including parents who removed their children from charter schools to the study would provide important insights into what charter schools are doing wrong as opposed to focusing on those satisfied enough to remain with charter schools.

Judging from the statewide data on academic achievement presented by the TEA Evaluation, it would be tempting to say that Texas' charter schools are not meeting parental demands. The charter parents surveyed here, however, reported just the opposite – that their

charter school had not only satisfied their initial enrollment criteria, but also improved grades. Until these reported academic perceptions and actual observed data are compared, it will be hard to reconcile national trends in charter school achievement data with such high levels of parental satisfaction.

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