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Exploring the Role of Family-School Partnerships in School Choice

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Abstract

Parental access to useful information about schools continues to be a structural barrier that limits the equity potential of school choice programs. While "information interventions" or simplified and readable knowledge resources show promise for counteracting information disparities between families, this line of research has provided limited insight on the particular preferences and needs of parents or the value of person-to-person interpretive assistance in school decisions. This exploratory study uses qualitative methods to investigate parent-school collaboration for the purpose of school selection in Washington, D.C. Drawing on a social capital framework, this study analyzes information transactions from parents' perspectives to clarify ways in which school personnel currently function as liaisons of choice. Findings from this study indicate future opportunities for districts to improve the outcome of school choice through better training of school and district personnel.

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Educational inequalities persist between low- and middle-income students attending urban schools (Bennet & Cohen, 2019; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2018) despite repeated illustrations (Kozol, 2005) of the injustice of urban school opportunity gaps (Ladson-Billings, 2013). In the past three decades, a growing faith in the ability of market mechanisms to serve public ends has fueled the expansion of "choice" as the centerpiece of cities' efforts to reduce racial and class-based inequities and improve access to high-quality educational opportunities for disadvantaged students (Buras & Apple, 2005).

In practice, most Americans exercise school choice by selecting a home in a particular attendance zone or by enrolling their children in a private school (Lareau, 2014). However, many urban school districts designate choice policies as means for families to attend various charter, magnet, voucher, or traditional public schools. Theoretically, school choice expands access to high-performing schools for historically disadvantaged low-income Black and Latinx students and improves the efficiency of all schools as market pressures foster school improvements or closures (Betts, 2005; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Figlio & Hart, 2011). However, school choice policies have, in some cases, exacerbated inequities as studies show that they accompany increased stratification by class and race (Ellison & Aloe, 2019; Kotok, Frankenberg, Schafft, Mann, & Fuller, 2017).

One explanation for these findings involves parents' unequal access to useful school information. Schools and districts disseminate information through websites and printed resources handed out at events like open houses, but parents have different capacities to make use of these resources based on the difficult readability of text, challenge of parsing objective content from marketing, and scarcity of non-English materials (Delale-O'Connor, 2019; Sattin-

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Bajaj, 2016). Research reveals that parents generally lean on their social networks for recommendations on school decisions as well as procedural knowledge since these sources of information help to reduce the cognitive demands of making decisions and, as a status marker, provide a basis for social comparisons (Bader, Lareau & Evans, 2019; Ellison & Aloe, 2019). This knowledge often stems from eyewitness experiences, judgements, and consultation rather than formal measures on district websites (Schneider & Gottlieb, 2021). Studies suggest that low-income families tend to be less likely than middle-income families to have access to contacts who offer information about high-performing schools and how to gain enrollment (Fong, 2019; Teske, Fitzpatrick, & Kaplan, 2007; Weinenger, 2014). Nor are they as well prepared to visit schools or navigate new relationships and procedural requirements (Haley-Lock & Posey-Maddox, 2016; Wright-Costello & Phillippo, 2020) Such work is particularly difficult to manage for families with rigid work schedules, health challenges, or financial constraints (André-Bechely; Patillo, Delale-O'Connor & Butts, 2014).

While scholars assert that low-income parents may have less access to information than middle-income and affluent parents, for a variety of reasons, there is little research on how low-income parents access and use information they do have to choose a school (Bell, 2009; Fong, 2019). By examining the information and resources parents possess or commonly access, we might clarify which information interventions and support strategies parents are likely to make use of. Some studies suggest that school personnel might be valuable sources of assistance and insider information regarding school choice, but our evidence concerning these relationships is limited (Nield, 2005; Sattin-Bajaj, Jennings, Corcoran, Baker-Smith & Hailey, 2018).

In this study, I explore school choice information transactions and interpretitve assistance by interviewing parents whose children attend school in the highly evolved school choice context

of Washington D.C. The study is guided by two research questions: 1) How do DC public school parents obtain school choice information or assistance from school-based sources? and 2) In what manner do schools share information or guide parents in ways that influence their choice processes? The study draws on social capital theory to explain how parents gather information resources through school-based relationships. In doing so, it contributes to scholarship on parental supports for school choice. Findings from this study suggest an opportunity for urban districts to improve the outcomes of school choice through better training.

Literature Review

Researchers have long recognized information as the "Achilles' heel" of school choice (Bridge, 1978, p. 504) and shown that families' abilities to obtain and use information about schools may determine their children's access to high-performing schools (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Holme, 2002; Sattin-Bajaj, 2016; Teske & Schneider, 2001). Disparities in information access and use between parents arise through a variety of mechanisms, including their social networks (Bell, 2009; Lareau & Goyette, 2014); the time and resources they can to devote to the "labor of choice" (André-Bechely, 2013) and their access to and comprehension of formal information sources that school and districts disseminate (Delale-O'Connor, 2019; Teske, et al., 2007). Such information asymmetries between families are associated with unequal educational outcomes along the lines of race and SES (Lareau, 2014).

A growing body of literature on information interventions suggests that district, state or school actors can influence parents' decision by equipping choosers with tailored content about schools. This approach builds on research showing that information presented in simple and readable formats encourages well-informed decisions (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). Economists, in

particular, have demonstrated the positive impact of information resources like single-page information sheets with schools' test score data (Hastings and Weinstein, 2008); parent testimonials (Valant & Loeb, 2014); websites featuring graphics and limited text (Glazerman, Nichols-Barrer, Valant, Chandler & Burnett, 2018); and targeted lists of nearby schools with above-average graduation rates (Corcoran, Jennings, Cohodes, & Sattin-Bajaj, 2018). Others underscore the importance of interpretative assistance, as when middle school guidance counselors aid families with high school selections (Haxton, 2010; Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2018). Such studies reveal that the framing and provision of information are key; yet they provide limited insight into the comparative impact of different forms of information; the particular preferences and needs of parents; or the possibility that different social groups benefit from different interventions. Additionally, these studies do little to challenge the types of information being used, merely asking whether it has been efficiently communicated.

School-based information sharing, in which parents and school employees work together to make educational decisions, offers an alternative form of intervention. This knowledge that comes from school personnel might be more beneficial than insights gained from conducting web searches or visiting school fairs because school personnel may have experience or expertise with the district landscape and awareness of students' academic strengths. Some scholars contend that lower SES families, in particular, view their children's current schools as reliable in educational matters (Andre-Becheley, 2013; Sattin-Bajaj 2016; Teske et al., 2007). As such, school personnel may be well positioned to help parents navigate the overwhelming and impersonal educational marketplace (Nield, 2005). Current models of choice are predicated on competition between schools with little incentive to provide parents with objective guidance; but some evidence points to the effectiveness of more holistic, less solitary approaches to school

decisions. For example, Sattin-Bajaj et al. (2018) found that some guidance counselors selectively expand their roles to assist low-income students with choice even in the absence of policy directives. Beyond school campuses, nonprofit-backed parent advocates have used "hands-on, personalized assistance" (Jochim, Heyward, Gross, 2019, p. 2) to aid parents in navigating selection processes while scholars have shown that sending targeted text messages to parents improves their likelihood of completing key application requirements (Weixler, Valant, Bassok, Doromal & Gerry, 2019).

Studies outside of the scope of K-12 school choice also show that individualized assistance with key decisions has significant impact in areas like Medicare Part D (Kling et al., 2012) health insurance plan selection (Chen, 2019), college attendance (Carrell & Sacerdote, 2013), and FAFSA completion (Bettinger, Long, & Oreopoulos, 2012). Such collaborative approaches, where they exist in schools, might accommodate parents' various notions of educational quality and take more seriously the importance of matching schools and families' needs (Harris & Larsen, 2015).

Scholars have generated limited knowledge of parents' search processes that involve interactions with school-based personnel. Sattin-Bajaj et al.'s (2018) study of school counselors and choice guidance used interviews with 88 guidance counselors who faced resource constraints and administrative data to track students' next-school enrollments. The authors found that about one fourth of counselors in the study provided students personalized choice support or information beyond offering the generic information concerning deadlines and school statistics that their roles prescribed. Even fewer studies center parent information-gathering activities in Washington, D.C. Teske et al. (2007) conducted 800 telephone-based surveys across Washington,

D.C., Denver, and Milwaukee and found that "information gaps" (p. 48) exist between the lowest income parents (below $20,000 annual income) and those just above this threshold. However, survey-based studies may fail to capture parents' complex actions within specific contexts and elicit a nuanced understanding of parents' preferences, needs, and expectations as they relate to school choice information.

Parental access to useful school information is fundamental to the equity potential of school choice policies. Yet, parents' attempts to acquire information and assistance from their children's current schools in their next-school selection has under-researched. To better understand the process, this study investigates the role of parent-school partnering in parents' next-school selection, particularly among low-income and racially/ethnically minoritized parents. The study views information exchanges from parents' perspectives and clarifies ways in which school personnel can function as liaisons of choice.

Conceptual Framework

As the primary framework for this study, social capital theory guides the investigation and focuses the analysis. Social capital refers to assets nested in relationships or social structures which provide advantages to capital holders (Lin, 2001). I adopt this framework because scholarship indicates that school choice decisions tend to be relational experiences (Bossetti, 2004; Fong, 2019; Goldring & Phillips, 2008). That is, as parents refine their preferences and goals for their children's school enrollment, they interpret signals, suggestions, and examples of valued educational goods from those in their social networks (Bader et al., 2019). Reflecting the social nature of school choice, I examine parents' efforts to obtain information from and

collaborate with school personnel and school personnel's attempts to advise parents about school options and enrollment processes.

In large urban districts, school choice forces parents to manage copious amounts of information. Filtering information through trusted social connections offers shortcuts or heuristics that may guide choosers through a thicket of data and alternatives and, in turn, make their decisions more feasible (Simon, 1997; Villavicencio, 2013). Procuring information from trusted sources allows parents to bypass the cognitive demands and time it takes to acquire and array knowledge about schools (Bell, 2009; Lareau, 2014). Thus, access to social capital helps refines decision-making pathways (Bourdieu, 1986) through which, for instance, parents may access recommendations or details about enrollment events or influential administrators.

Parents may seek to draw on "bridging social capital" (Larsen et al., 2004, p. 64) from within their children's schools, which potentially opens up valued knowledge and opportunities. Using the institutional structure of their child's school, parents may move beyond the restrictive bonds of their own peer networks. Teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators are potentially valuable sources of social capital as they hold authority and networks of their own. Institutional structures mediate how these various actors share their capital with families on an ad hoc basis. In some cases, school officials deliberately use their resources, reputations, and power "in a strategic and supportive fashion" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1075) to empower minoritized students. Such authentic and direct support to low income and minoritized families may also improve parent-school relationships in low-income urban communities (Noguera, 2001).

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Context and Research Design

Setting and Participants

This study examines parents' accounts of school choice decisions and school information attainment in Washington, D.C. This large metropolitan city has a robust intra-district choice program; families may accept automatic placement in their neighborhood school or apply to up to 12 of the nearly 250 charter schools, out-of-boundary traditional public schools, selective-admissions schools, or voucher-accepting private schools by taking part in the MySchoolDC unified school lottery. This web-based system centralizes application procedures, school waitlists and many types of formal information into a single platform, improving efficiency and parental access to information beyond the school-by-school enrollment approach that operated prior to 2014 (Glazerman & Dotter, 2017). Systemwide, the District's schools educate a racially/ethnically and economically diverse student population. In 2018, the composition of DC's public student population (including charter) schools was 66% Black, 19% Latinx, and 11% White while Asian students and multiracial students each made up 2% (OSSE, 2019). Eleven percent of students received English language learner services, and 17% received special education services (OSSE, 2019). D.C. has a degree of income inequality that is both characteristic of urban school contexts and severe (Schaffer, White, & Brown, 2018). The median household income was $82,604 in 2017 but 26% of the under-eighteen population fell below the federal poverty rate of $24,858 for a family of four (Annie E. Casey, 2019).

This study draws on interviews with a set of 10 parents whose children were enrolled in Washington, D.C. public schools and who were in the process of choosing a school or had done so in the past year. Eight of the ten parents were Black and two were Latinx. Five Black parents

and two Latinx parents were low SES while three of the Black parents were middle SES, as evidenced through the children's enrollment in the Free and Reduced-Price Meals program. For more information on parental and student characteristics, see Appendix A. I recruited parents who attended school or district-sponsored information events and those in public marketplaces, which allowed me to converse with parents who may not necessarily be attending recruitment events or open houses. I conducted initial recruitment conversations with all parents to determine their eligibility as those who were conducting school choice or had recently done so. Following in-person screening conversations, I selected ten parents who had recently chosen new public schools for the child to participate in formal conversations, which took place between January and March 2020. Though the interview sample is relatively small and not generalizable, this size favored a richer discussion of each case and context.

Data Collection

Parents engaged in one or two individual, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 40 to 70 minutes. Following in-person screening conversations, I had one conversation with most parents, though two parents invited me to follow up in subsequent call. The formal interviews took place by phone as each participant opted for this mode of communication. In one case, I communicated with a Spanish-speaking parent with the help of her college-aged son, who translated our conversation.

In the interviews, parents described their processes of obtaining information about school options and getting assistance with their school decisions. One key area of inquiry concerned their exchanges with school personnel and school-offered materials and advice. I asked open-ended questions (Maxwell, 2012) that invited parents to share how they participated in the school

choice process, such as by attending events, learning about options, and ordering their school preferences. I aimed for my data collection process to be systematic by asking all parents the same questions but flexible in giving parents the opportunity to share content they considered most relevant. All participants permitted me to record our conversations. I used Otter AI to transcribe these recordings, then corrected transcripts as needed to ensure accuracy.

Data Analysis

I conducted data analysis continuously and concurrently with formal conversations. In addition to writing reflective memos to identify emergent themes and rival hypotheses, I engaged in a two-cycle coding process with data focusing and reduction techniques following each stage (Saldaña, 2021). In the first cycle of coding, I used a combination of in-vivo, descriptive, process, and emotion codes. In-vivo codes like "doing my research" seemed like an authentic and precise medium for tracking participants' ideas and experiences so I used these codes most frequently. Descriptive codes like "grade level" and "special needs" were useful for identifying participant and school characteristics while process codes like "creating a grid" and "checking out schools early" allowed me to identify parents' search activities. A comparative analysis that arrayed coded excerpts of participants' responses to different interview questions allowed me to identify commonalities and differences across parents' responses that made the presence or absence of certain resources highly visible. This simple matrix aided cross-case and individual case analysis.

A second phase of coding involving deductive codes helped focus the data analysis since these codes represented identified patterns in the first cycle codes. Deductive codes like "events attended," "grapevine," and "expectations of school," were particularly relevant to exchanges of

information and assistance across parent-school personnel interactions. Following the two cycles of coding, I mapped categories of codes across the transcripts and collapsed them into eight themes based on their relevance to the research questions (Saldaña, 2021). Using these themes, which included "own perceptions of their 'choice' duties," "collaboration," and "parents' assumptions about school's roles" I was able to analyze key segments of data among different cases that were linked to the research questions. Through the process of exploring themes in the data, I held parent's possession or lack of social capital as a focal point, one that contours their expectations of and efforts at information sharing between families and school professionals. Overall findings from this combined and iterative process are reported below.

Findings

Through my analyses, I identified findings pertaining to parents' interactions with school personnel in school choice processes which clustered around two major themes. First, while some parents reached out to school-based contacts, most parents reported little information and assistance from faculty at their child's school. This support was less than they wanted but about what they expected. Second, the quality of family-school relationships appeared to play a role in parents' receptiveness to assistance or initiative in reaching out to faculty members.

Finding 1: Needs Unmet, Largely as Expected

Parents described the process of choosing a school as "tedious," "crazy," "stressful," and "disappointing." This experience put a strain on most parents as they attempted to match their children's strengths and their views of a good school with available options. With two notable exceptions, study participants reported that school personnel played a limited role, if any, in facilitating school choices as collaborators, advisors, or conduits of school knowledge.

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With a sense of disillusion about school administrators' concern for the school's "bottom line," one parent, Veronica, asserted, "In DC, nobody reaches out to you." Veronica felt that because administrators were preoccupied with maximizing enrollment, they dedicated little effort to assisting outgoing students and their parents. This sentiment was expressed by another parent, Carlos, who was new to DC. He lamented the absence of communication regarding his eighth-grade daughter's transition, stating,

> When it comes to something bad, I think I hear about that really quickly. I gotta
> have a meeting on that. But when she's doing an excellent job or this is now her
> last year and we want to talk more about high school, we don't get that same push
> or drive.

Though some parents talked about taking initiative, their efforts often did not elicit assistance. Michelle, whose daughter has severe special needs, questioned her child's school for several months about where a student with a similar physical condition matriculated. Her unreciprocated attempts to solicit this information or any suggestions were frustrating. She described the school's special education transition coordinator as "behind the ball," and asserted, "I ultimately found out was there was no school expertise; it was going to be my own." The experience led Michelle to conclude, "the schools aren't knowledgeable; they are not building partnerships." By comparison, this search experience with her third daughter was far more complicated than with her older two children since she trusted that a top-rated school would adequately educate her other daughters but not her youngest. She noted, "the hardest part was peeling that layer back for special Ed." Michelle found that acquiring such pertinent information about schools' success

with special education was quite difficult despite her confidence and experience in school administration.

Parents did, however, reveal instances where school personnel influenced their decisions through ad hoc conversations. For example, Aaliyah reported that various personnel, including "the principal, some administrators in the office, and some teachers," questioned her about high school preferences and gave her advice about schools to apply to. According to Aaliyah, these unplanned conversations were initiated by an administrator or teacher. Aaliyah and her daughter followed some of these of recommendations, like her principal's suggestion to add a selective enrollment high school to her My School DC lottery list of preferred schools. In response to a recommendation to list a top-ranked magnet school on her application, Aaliyah and her daughter attended an open house. While Aaliyah appreciated these suggestions, noting "They [school personnel] have been good to me and my family for a long time," she conceived of the search not as a collective effort, but as "just a family matter."

Other parents talked about how school personnel made minor contributions to their searches. In contrast to Aaliyah's discussions with school personnel, which were ongoing and personalized, most exchanges between school personnel and parents or their children were isolated. Carlos referred to a single discussion between a counselor at his daughter's public middle school and his daughter that involved a few suggestions about future schools. Lori and Antonio shared stories of administrators from neighboring schools giving presentations to introduce students in transition grades to neighboring schools. There were other examples of school sponsored informational events where teachers brought students to neighboring schools for open houses that took place during the school day. Lori's daughter, Rayven, visited two local

schools in this way. Both parents appreciated these school-sponsored information events, which exposed students to only one or two schools, but it is unclear why these particular schools were selected.

Another parent, Mia, revealed an unlikely form of guidance: her teacher counselled her to remove her child from her current school. Mia explained:

> I was on the fence about pulling her [out], and her first-grade teacher wanted me
> to pull her. She felt like the school was about to undergo some changes that she
> didn't necessarily like. She felt like a new environment will be better for Kaliyah.

Mia's situation shows that school personnel can help parents make a connection to a new school and dissuade them from considering certain schools. In all instances of school assistance, Carlos' insight that "all information is good information" rang true as parents appeared to appreciate any and all advice and support from school personnel.

None of the parents expected ongoing collaboration with school employees, but some expected personnel to keep them apprised of school choice deadlines and check in during their child's transition year. Antonio and Imani were particularly hopeful about family-school teamwork. Anticipating that school personnel would reach out to parents, Imani asserted, "they know about your child; they taught your child. And they might have information about or might be knowledgeable about the other schools in the city."

Some parents contended that helping students and their parents with school transitions was not in the school's interest. Of the ten parents, four complained that school personnel would not use their time or resources to aid parents with information or guidance. For example, Marlena and

her daughter, who were searching for a high school, expected no help, reminders, or information. "Absolutely not!" Marlena said when I asked her if anyone at her child's school was involved in the search. She explained that her daughter's middle school had an affiliated high school and proclaimed, "they don't want that attrition." Other parents were just as doubtful that school personnel would play a role aiding parents with transitions. Veronica viewed schools in DC "like a business" concerned more with recruiting students than improving their educational services. She believed that schools' focus on incoming students posed a "conflict of interest" that discouraged them from tending to outgoing students. Similarly, Carlos compared school recruitment to how professional sports teams use "a draft." He explained how schools tried to attract the most desirable students by representing themselves in the best possible light even if it involved deliberate deception.

Participants accepted that parents were largely on their own in the school choice process and believed themselves capable of identifying schools that were beneficial for their children. But parents raised questions about how some families might be unprepared to manage next-school enrollment. Rashida, a parent of an eighth-grade student, shared, "My daughter is showing a lot of initiative, but you got a lot of homeless students. How are they making out? And what about students with elderly parents, what's the district doing for them?" Overall, parents' low expectations of assistance from school personnel nurtured limited efforts to connect with members of their children's schools or make meaning of school personnel's limited guidance.

Finding 2: Collaboration Conditioned by Family-School Relationships

Although the interview questions targeted information gathering and not perceptions of relationships with school personnel, seven out of ten participants' shared memories of

dissatisfying interactions with school personnel. Considering that two of the families had recently relocated and had no earlier experiences in DC, this may be a significant proportion of the parents. Depending on school personnel's past responses to parent grievances and rapport between parents and school, parents appeared more willing to contact school personnel when relationships were strong and less willing when relationships were strained or nonexistent.

Four parents described problematic incidents involving their children or themselves and schools, and their perception that schools were unlikely to assist with school choice. Veronica had concerns about her child's teacher and shared doubt that schools would advise current students when they were so focused on recruiting new students. Relaying her experience in her daughter's kindergarten class, she remarked, "I worry about the teacher. Like, she just couldn't handle the kids. I'd walk in, and it's total chaos, like rolling around the floor – right out of a cartoon." Another parent, Lori, said she did not ask for or receive any information or guidance from her child's middle school and, at several points in the conversation, offered criticism about the school personnel's conduct. She reported that teachers acted "immature" and "argued with students like siblings." Lori mentioned lack of "support" from teachers who "did not know their students' needs" or "care." Experiences like these appeared to communicate to parents that they could not count on schools for guidance with future school enrollment if more basic educational objectives were not being met.

Alternatively, when parents appreciated school personnel's treatment of them and their children, they expressed confidence in personnel and faith that future assistance might be forthcoming. Antonio praised the way school personnel dealt with a frustrating incident between his daughter and a classmate. When his daughter was being picked on and had an altercation with

other students, he said, "they [the teacher and principal] were very concerned but they took control of it," and noted that the school granted his request that his daughter be switched to a different class. Similarly, Aaliyah and Gabriella's positive experiences with school personnel seemed to reinforce hopefulness. Aaliyah explained that school personnel had been "helpful," noting, "they've known us for years." Gabriella also believed her interactions with personnel suggested "they were helping" her son and would continue to.

Three other parents who seemed to have an overall positive impression of personnel at their child's school recounted incidents that caused them to feel let down. Mia remarked, "[my daughter's] last year being there, it was kind of stressful for her. She started getting bullied in school. The school didn't really aid her or me like I felt they should have." Mia ultimately transferred her daughter. In a similar case, Marlena removed her daughter from a school due to uncertainty about the school's rapid expansion and concerns about communication. When Marlena found out her daughter was routinely absent from a single class, she asked the principal whether she could expect the school to contact her and was told "no." For her, this situation reinforced her perception that the school's "growth trajectory to 1,500 students" was problematic, because rapid growth would prevent school personnel from reaching out to her about important matters. Marlena asserted, "they are not giving any assistance." She praised many aspects of the school, but while the school was part of a K-12 continuum into which her daughter might have matriculated, Marlena was skeptical about school personnel's commitment to working with parents.

Discussion and Conclusion

Parents' relationships with school personnel may represent an important source of social capital through which parents procure information or assistance, but in this study that resource was largely untapped. Taken at face value, these findings appear to indicate that while school personnel may be positioned as platforms to share information or interpretive assistance with parents, they did not adequately capitalize on their knowledge and resources to help parents who were choosing schools. If school personnel do not see schooling decisions as within their purview and parents are reluctant to ask them for ideas or guidance, then little communication between the two on this topic should be expected.

In this study, the parents' low expectations of school-based assistance appeared, in part, to stem from their conceptions of school choice as their responsibility. This orientation may be understandable, but it is rooted in the structure of DC's school choice policy. Like other districts, DC has invested heavily in online information sources and prioritized an abundance of content rather than opportunities for communication between parents and school personnel (Patillo, Delale-O'Connor & Butts, 2014). In the absence of formal school-based roles or structures designed to help parents with their decision making, it is often up to parents to initiate partnerships with guidance counselors or other school staff who take an active interest in their child's next school placement. And while other school personnel may pick up the baton, counselors themselves will likely struggle to offer personalized assistance given current constraints on their time and heavy student loads (Monaghan, Hawkins & Hernandez, 2020).

The findings of this exploratory study underscore how collaboration between families and schools always take place within the context of specific relationships, parents' earlier

experiences, which were more or less helpful to parents, and environments that invite or disregard parents' voices. Under a voluntary arrangement of information sharing or support, weak relationships or disappointing parent experiences seemed to inhibit communication or help seeking while positive experiences encouraged it. Parents might have been less inclined to use their "voice" to try to get un-promised informational goods or to establish a link to school personnel if prior interactions left them skeptical about school personnel's capacity and willingness to work with them. Moreover, where mutual trust is low due to mishandled incidents or strained relationships, parents may be less receptive to school personnel's attempts to reach out. Thus, district or school-based supports with parental choice will benefit from attentiveness to the quality of school-family communication and relationships.

Institutional roles and responsibilities help shape stakeholder expectations. School choice inequities around information access suggest possibilities to redesign these policies in ways that advance the public good (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). A call to reexamine school choice policy designs, supports, and structures for greater equity is increasingly the subject of conversation, if not successful innovation (Corcoran et al., 2018; Minow, 2011; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2018). Given the expansion of urban school choice policies and their disproportionate impact on low-income Black and Latinx families' access to quality schools (Aggarwal, 2014; Delale-O'Connor, 2019), the stakes of such reforms are critically urgent. By embedding information in parents' and students' interactions with school personnel, policy makers and educational authorities might collaborate with parents in making school placement decisions that lead to better academic and life outcomes for students well after these transitions.

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This exploratory study adds to our theoretical understandings of school choice by highlighting how social capital, which is embedded in school-parent partnerships, depends on parents' expectations, family-school personnel relationships, and families' various, self-guided research processes. Amidst scholars' call to draw on theory and research to identify practices that enhance urban school practitioners' impact and students' educational opportunities (Milner & Lomotey, 2013), this form of decision assistance may suggest a viable support worthy of further study. Additional inquiry into this line of research might examine intersections between districts' efforts to provide information and assistance and families' willingness to capitalize on these resources. For instance, future studies might investigate how parents respond to school personnel's efforts to collaborate for school selection and whether structured counseling relationships would build trust between schools and parents, or depend on preexisting bonds of trust. Moreover, studies might ask how being in a charter or public school, a PK-12 continuum, or a school with high or low performance scores impact the viability of information sharing arrangements, as some schools have a proprietary stake in channeling students in specific directions or possibly even obscuring information.

In many metropolitan contexts like Washington, D.C., families ostensibly encounter an immense number of school options. For the many parents who wish to select a quality school for their child, sources of information and assistance are invaluable. Since scholars have limited knowledge about how parents navigate district and school structures to learn about, evaluate, and select schools (Bell, 2009; Nield, 2005; Sattin-Bajaj, 2016), our understanding of school choice would benefit from additional research that takes parents' and students' perspectives. Recognizing parents as critical actors and unpacking their interests, goals, and needs as they see

them is the only way to ensure "information interventions" (Corcoran et al., p. 3, 2018) that

target low SES parents are well conceived and supportive.

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Appendix A: Participant Characteristics

Participant	Grade of Child Transiting	Relative Experience Choosing Schools	SES	Race/ Ethnicity	Type of School (current)	DC Star Rating (of 5 stars)
Mother	8th	child is oldest of 3	Low	Black	Public	4
Mother	9th	child is younger of 3	Low	Black	Charter	3
Father	8th	child is oldest of 4	Low	Black	Public	3
Mother	12th & 3rd	recent immigrants	Low	Black	Public	3
Mother	8th	middle child of 3	Mid	Black	Public	4
Father	2nd & K	older 2 of 3	Low	Latinx	Charter	2
Mother	K	only child	Low	Black	Public	3
Mother	2nd	only child	Mid	Black	Charter	4
Mother	7th	middle child of 3	Low	Latinx	Public	3
Mother	5th	child is youngest of 3	Mid	Black	Charter	3