

CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF OPEN ENROLLMENT
IN A RURAL NORTHERN CALIFORNIA SCHOOL DISTRICT

by

Sarah C. Drisko

A Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of Humboldt State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

In Education

December 2006

CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF OPEN ENROLLMENT
IN A RURAL NORTHERN CALIFORNIA SCHOOL DISTRICT

by

Sarah C. Drisko

Approved by the Master's Thesis Committee:

Sally Botzler, Thesis Advisor

Date

Louie Bucher, Committee Member

Date

Eric Van Duzer, Graduate Coordinator

Date

Chris Hopper, Interim Dean for Research and Graduate Studies

Date

ABSTRACT

CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF OPEN ENROLLMENT IN A RURAL NORTHERN CALIFORNIA SCHOOL DISTRICT

SARAH C. DRISKO

Intra-district transfers among elementary schools in Longview School District altered enrollment patterns among the schools. This study identifies the reasons parents chose to transfer their children beyond their neighborhood schools and offers recommendations for equitable access to choice.

Surveys were mailed to all families at three elementary schools. Questions probed parents' use of school choice, reasons for transferring their children, and overall satisfaction. A qualitative examination of responses shows that many parents relied primarily on socioeconomic factors in making their choice; while lack of access to information and transportation influenced many non-choosing families.

Recommendations to equalize opportunity to participate in intra-district transfers include utilizing more effective ways to disseminate information, providing opportunities for transportation, and increasing the academic quality in neighborhood schools.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply thankful to all of the parents who made time to complete my school choice survey. Their thoughtful comments touched me deeply, as both teacher and parent. Concern and hope for our children's future success is the common ground on which all parents meet.

Two professors have served as my thesis advisor. Eric Rofes guided me throughout my research and literature review. A model teacher, researcher, and advocate; I picture him as a beam of light through a thick fog.

Dr. Sally Botzler generously agreed to advise me during the remaining stages of my work. Sally's first-hand knowledge of public schools and skillful editing positively influenced this thesis. Her personal support meant a great deal to me, and she has my deepest respect and gratitude.

I also thank Eric Van Duzer, who provided me with considerable time and extensive expertise. Louis Bucher also deserves thanks for his numerous suggestions. Due to the help of these individuals, my learning and this thesis are vastly improved.

I feel immensely fortunate to have attended Humboldt State University. Many individuals, like Ann Diver-Stammes, seemed to delight in helping me to achieve my goals.

Glenna and Evan, my children, grew up during the years in which I studied school choice. They have changed from children to friends. Their interest in my work and belief in me are more important than they might imagine.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	4
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY.....	30
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS	37
CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS.....	51
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS.....	64
APPENDIX A	68
REFERENCES.....	70

TABLES

TABLE 4.1: Parent Survey Response Rates	37
TABLE 4.2: Parent Responses to Questions 1 through 4	38
TABLE 4.3: Question Two – District Schools Previously Attended.....	39
TABLE 4.4: Question Three – Specific Concerns Regarding Transportation.....	40
TABLE 4.5: Question Five – Parents who Exercised Choice.....	41
TABLE 4.6: Question Six – Reasons that Parents Chose to Transfer Their Children.....	42
TABLE 4.7: Question Seven – Did You Tell about Your Decision to Transfer.....	46
TABLE 4.8: Question Eight – How Did You Feel about Your New School.....	47
TABLE 4.9: Question Nine – Another Other Thoughts Regarding School Choice	48

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Parents often get involved in the process of choosing a particular school or classroom. In my own case, when my daughter was set to enter kindergarten in 1985, I wrote a letter to the school's administrator to request that she attend the morning session; since she was still taking naps in the afternoon. When my request was denied, I made the decision to enroll my child in a private school.

Several years later, my family moved to another part of the state, and I took care to purchase a home within the boundaries of the school that I wanted my children to attend. Each spring, I visited classrooms in order to select my children's teachers for the following year. My requests were based on certain factors concerning student engagement: did the teacher present information in a manner that was interesting to the students? I also looked at the teacher's affect, and the manner in which s/he spoke with the children. I even judged the teacher's overall responsiveness to my presence in the classroom, since I expected to be involved with many activities throughout the school year. Because I felt comfortable in the educational setting, I was able to strongly influence my children's school experiences. I knew that many families didn't or, for some reason, couldn't exercise choice. For those who did, however, I assumed that they, too, were evaluating their children's schools and teachers on criteria similar to mine.

In 1993, a new statute was entered into the California Education Code (Section 35160.5 (c), Chapter 204), which is commonly known as Intra-district or

Open Enrollment. The law states that parents/guardians of any student who resides within a district's boundaries may apply to enroll their child in any district school, regardless of their location of residence within the district. The new law required all school districts to adopt rules for implementation of the open enrollment policy no later than July 1, 1994 (Westly, 2005, Background section, ¶1). The district where I am employed, Longview School District (pseudonym), complied with that law and instituted their open enrollment policy that fall.

At that time, I was teaching at an elementary school in a part of the city known for the lower socioeconomic levels of the families within the community, as well as the higher proportions of families from newly-immigrated and other varied ethnic backgrounds. The school itself enjoyed a reputation for a strong faculty and had extra, categorical funding that was not available at some schools in the district, such as Title I funds. The reading intervention and Hmong family literacy programs served many students, and assessments of these programs showed good results. Within a few years of initiating the new open enrollment policy, however, many families began to enroll their children in other schools in the district.

It was perplexing to me that anyone would want to leave this school, and I was very interested in finding out the reasons for families' decisions to request intra-district transfers for their children. As a Master of Arts in Education student at this same time, my initial research about this phenomenon grew out of an assignment in a graduate qualitative methods course. I knew exactly what I wanted to discover during my qualitative research class: what were families seeking when they chose

to move their children out of their neighborhood school in favor of another? This turned out to be my M.A. Thesis research question. The findings from that initial study so fascinated me that I conducted similar research for two additional years at other schools in the district. In the intervening years since my initial research, school choice has taken on many meanings and variations. It has become a major educational reform strategy, and is touted as a parent's privilege in the current federal legislation known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). At present, entirely new school delivery systems have arisen. Thus, it is more important than ever to understand the reasoning used by parents when they transfer their children to different schools. Since a school's budget is directly affected by student enrollment calculated as Average Daily Attendance (ADA), school principals are generally very concerned about the impact that school choice is having on their budgets.

In this thesis, I will examine the history of recent school choice models. I then describe the methods I used in conducting my own research, the results, and my analyses. Finally, I conclude with recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Neighborhood School

As a child growing up in rural Connecticut, I lived within walking distance of a historical site so famous that it regularly drew tourists. It was our town's long-unused one-room schoolhouse--the last one in the state. I often enjoyed visiting there by myself; going inside and imagining my elderly neighbors as young students in that room. As a child, my romantic notions of that old-fashioned neighborhood school intermingled with my own grade-school history lessons and with my heritage as the daughter of a first-generation immigrant. My parents and teachers had all told me that the uniquely wonderful thing about being American was that any of us could be successful if only we chose to work hard and get a good education. The neighborhood school was a symbol of idealism and unity for me, as it had been for the entire country throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Fuller, 2000, p. 234).

Having one common school also represented America's attempt to assimilate its large immigrant population into a shared set of cultural, political, and economic values. The common schoolhouses used the same textbooks, teaching methods, and socialization techniques. Public schools were to become the forum for teaching cultural expectations and values, in addition to academic knowledge. The uniform

values that were imparted were those of the Protestant, white, middle class (Fuller, 2000, p. 17-21).

The role of the common school is deeply ingrained in the American Dream and remains a fundamental tenet of what many Americans believe about their society: that every child, regardless of race, religion, sex, or socio-cultural status, will receive a free education and be able to learn whatever is necessary to attain self-fulfillment and success in American society (Cookson & Berger, 2000, p.3).

Educational thinking expanded during the early part of the twentieth century with the progressive vision of John Dewey. His thinking inspired the founding of alternative schools which sought to educate what has come to be called the whole child. At the heart of these schools, curricular subjects were to be interconnected; and even non-academic classes were offered. Students also engaged in authentic learning experiences by participating in community activities (Fuller, 2000, p. 42).

Subsequent longitudinal tracking of the Deweyan-model school students found that their achievement compared favorably with students who had received conventional schooling. The Progressive Era in education was interrupted by World War II and disappeared during the conservative decade of the 1950's. Frederick L Rederfer, director of the Progressive Education Association, presented a possible explanation for the demise of this type of education. "A concern for security tended to strengthen conservatism and authoritarianism...everything connected with progressive education was under fire" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 100-101). It was

within this environment that the Supreme Court of the United States handed down the educational decision which forever changed the neighborhood school.

Brown v. Board of Education

In 1954, there were 17 states with laws mandating school segregation (Christiansen & Karp, 2003, p. 155). School desegregation was only one part of the broader battle for racial and economic equity that would rage during the 1960's and beyond. Individuals from many walks of life united to work towards greater racial equality: civil rights activists, students, politicians, religious groups, and liberal thinkers.

The 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, formalized the acknowledgement that students, segregated by race or color, were attending lower-caliber schools. The justices wrote:

In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms... We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. (U.S. Supreme Court, 1954)

In this historic decision about de facto segregation, the Supreme Court stated that white neighborhoods' schools were superior, due to factors such as their higher property values and the resultant higher tax contributions to schools (Tempes, 2001,

p. 24-26). The Supreme Court targeted desegregation as the means by which racial inequality in school opportunity would be eliminated. The burden of addressing and correcting social and economic injustice was placed on the shoulders of the educational community. The *Brown* decision refocused attention to the deeper purpose of education as a conduit for social values (Rofes & Stulberg, 2004, p. 20).

The ruling was greeted with non-action: a decade after *Brown v. Board of Education*, 98% of all Southern black students were still attending schools that were completely segregated (Christiansen & Karp, 2003, p. 156). Then, in 1964, during the Johnson Administration, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act; making discrimination illegal in programs which received federal aid. Between the passage of that act and the election of Richard Nixon in 1968, considerable progress toward the goal of desegregation was achieved. Christiansen and Karp (2003) found that "...the South moved from almost total racial separation to become the nation's most integrated region. The region went from virtually total apartheid to being the most integrated region in the U.S. between 1964 and 1970" (p. 156).

Yet, segregated schools were often the result of segregated neighborhoods. The most common racial and economic desegregation strategy used by school districts was the practice known as busing. Policy makers concluded that moving black students into white neighborhoods would provide equal access to higher-quality schooling. In order to achieve complete desegregation, white students, too, would be required to bus into formerly all-black neighborhood schools.

The *Brown* decision and the later Civil Rights Act initiated multiple reactions in people throughout the U.S.; for many, it was an emotionally painful time, and some people were quite angry. The struggle to translate the law into everyday schooling was frequently covered on television. The spectacle of police working to control impassioned demonstrators, while children attempted to attend school, was frightening and unforgettable.

Busing to achieve integration was largely unpopular with blacks and whites alike: long bus rides into unfamiliar neighborhoods did little to create a nurturing experience for students. W.E.B. Dubois, who once insisted that desegregation was critical, revised his opinion in what now seems visionary. He wrote:

The Negro needs neither separate nor mixed schools. What he needs is Education. What he must remember is that there is no magic either in mixed schools or segregated schools. A mixed school with poor unsympathetic teachers, with hostile public opinion, and no teaching of the truth concerning black folk is bad. A segregated school with ignorant placeholders, inadequate equipment, poor salaries is equally bad. Other things being equal the mixed school is the broader more natural basis for the education of all youth. It gives wider contacts; it inspires greater self-confidence; and suppresses the inferiority complex. But other things seldom are equal, and in that case, Sympathy, Knowledge, and the Truth outweigh all that the mixed school can offer. (DuBois, 1935, p. 335)

Vouchers

Another response to the *Brown* ruling was to devise a means to avoid it. The first school vouchers gave money to white families in Virginia so that their children could attend private, segregated schools. Several southern states passed tuition-grant and scholarship programs which offered public monies for tuition at qualified schools (Christiansen & Karp, 2003, p. 170).

In the mid-1950's, economist Milton Friedman proposed that it would be fiscally beneficial to give vouchers to parents who would use those public monies in whole or partial payment for their children to attend any school the family selected for them (Molnar, 1999, p. 3). While Friedman's proposal did not receive much attention at that time, the idea of vouchers continues to be debated and implemented to this day.

Southern conservatives, in their attempts to continue to offer segregated schools, were not the only ones to embrace vouchers. Following the Civil Rights Act of 1964, liberals saw vouchers as a means to improve school opportunities for the children of poor urban residents (O'Neil, 2004, p. 22). By the early 1970's, experimental voucher plans were operating in Alum Rock, California and Milwaukee, Minnesota. While the California voucher experiment is an example of pitfalls to avoid, Milwaukee continues to offer vouchers to families who use them to attend a school of their own choosing. Those who support vouchers assert they equalize "educational opportunity by giving all families the options now enjoyed only by

those wealthy enough to send their children to private schools or move to areas with high-quality public schools” (Fusarelli, 2003, p. 75).

Yet, of all recent state-level educational reforms, none has instigated as much conflict as do proposals for educational vouchers (Fusarelli, 2003, p. 75). One of the major stumbling blocks of voucher plans stems from the U.S. Constitution’s entitlement mandate, concerning separation of church and state. The Nixon Administration found its voucher plans shut down by the *Lemon v Kurtzman Decision*, which stated that tax dollars could not be used for student attendance at religiously-affiliated schools (Molnar, 1999, p. 4).

Court decisions have continually supported entitlement. The American Civil Liberties Union of Florida cheered their legal victory over Governor Jeb Bush’s school voucher program; which was a critical building block of his “A+ Plan for Education.” Florida courts denied the use of vouchers and ruled in favor of the ACLU on the grounds that public funds were being used to support sectarian institutions. Diverting public funds to support church, sect, or religiously-affiliated institutions is forbidden in the state’s constitution (ACLU, 2004, p. 1). Due to the contested nature of vouchers, other choice plans have met with greater acceptance.

Magnet Schools and Desegregation

The mandate to desegregate schools, and the consequent clashes over busing students into different neighborhood schools, pushed policy-makers to rethink methods to remedy educational inequality (Christensen & Karp, 2003, p. 170). In a 1975 amendment to the federal Emergency School Aid Act (ESAA), grants were

offered to districts for planning and establishing magnet schools as a means of achieving desegregation (Raywid, 1985, p. 449).

Magnet schools operate within the public schools, focusing on a subject area or instructional technique as a theme. A magnet school might emphasize technology, for instance, or offer a special program such as Montessori-based classes. In order to qualify for funding, the magnet's distinctive program must be attractive to people of all races. Enrollment must be voluntary and must be racially mixed.

When first established, magnet school proponents hoped to "attract white students whose parents would otherwise head to suburban schools by creating racially-integrated schools dedicated to special themes" (Fuller, 2000, p. 44).

Magnet schools were popular and expanded rapidly during the 1970's. While only 14 magnet schools were operating in the U.S. in 1975, within a decade there were 1.2 million students being educated in more than 3,000 magnet schools spread throughout 2,400 primarily-urban U.S. school districts (Fuller, 2000, p. 44).

As an integration technique, magnet schools have been successful. Numerous studies of school districts around the U.S. show magnets to be more racially integrated than general public school populations (Fuller, 2000, p.45; Raywid, 1985, p. 450). Although the government's original intent was to create a forum for voluntary desegregation, magnet schools began to be associated with broader educational implications: providing higher-quality education and offering choice to families. A 1996 national study of magnet school students' academic

achievement found that magnet students outperform public school students in general (Fuller, 2000, p. 45).

Magnet schools are very popular with parents. Many districts which offer magnet options report that demand for student enrollment exceeds space available, and many maintain long waiting lists. Various procedures are utilized to equitably enroll students: the most common is a lottery system. Some magnet schools enroll students based on a first-come, first-served basis; while others may require minimum test scores (Goldring & Smrekar, 2002, p. 13, 14).

Social Forces Influence Education in the 1960's and 70's

Apart from the issues brought to the forefront due to the *Brown* decision, other forces were impacting the way in which education was conducted. The 1960's and '70's saw a shift in social awareness concerning how to raise and educate our children. The public revisited convictions formerly advocated by John Dewey and began to favor a more humanistic approach to child rearing; moving away from what had come to be seen as the factory model of education. The stated purpose of schools also shifted away from preparing solid workers to enter our workforce; placing new emphasis on helping each child to develop their potential and to think for themselves (Fuller, 2000, p. 43). The book, *Summerhill*, by A.S. Neill was influential and began to shape parental and educational thinking. Neill, then the director of the Summerhill School in England, believed that children should be free from coercion, even to the point of allowing students to choose the manner in which they should spend their time at school (Neill, 1960, p. 5). Guided by this philosophy,

many parent-organized free schools, or alternative schools, sprang up. In response to this shift in thinking, public schools also began to experiment with alternatives.

Schools without walls, schools with themes, and schools that were child-centered became common. The National School Board Association (NSBA) found that in 1975 one quarter of the U.S. school districts were operating at least one alternative school. NSBA reported "...the concept (of alternative schooling) is definitely not on the fringe of American public school activity, and its significance is growing" (Wells, 1993, p. 35).

Desegregation and Community Control

Other major social changes also arose in the latter part of the 1960's. Tired of waiting for desegregation and dissatisfied with their children's reception in integrated schools, African American and Latino communities throughout the country proposed that they should create their own schools that would educate students in the values of their own culture (Rofes & Stulberg, 2004, p. 24). Inspired by new ideas of empowerment and control at a community level, Independent Schools sprang up between the 1960's and 1980's. These schools--progressive, financially and institutionally-separate from local school districts--contributed many of the ideologies seen in today's charter and school choice movements (Rofes & Stulberg, 2003, p.24-26).

A Nation at Risk

The field of education reflects society and constantly shifts in response to current political thinking, economic needs, and social viewpoints (Lauder, Hughes &

Watson, 1999, p. 23). Social trends during the 1960's and 1970's were embedded in the ideals of Kennedy's New Frontier and Johnson's Great Society. The central government was supportive of community action agencies, was involved in creating opportunities for low-income families, and searched for new ways to bring more Americans into the middle class (Fuller, 2000, p. 16-18).

At the start of the Reagan administration, the U. S. economy had been in a major economic recession. In 1983, the politically-conservative government directed the National Commission on Excellence in Education to prepare a report on the state of American education. The report, *A Nation at Risk*, declared that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur--others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments" (Gardner et al., 1993, p.1). The report specifically warned that U.S. schools were not preparing a future generation of students who could successfully enter the world economy. It "argued that a lack of accountability and competition were the culprits, not family poverty, unequal school financing, or uneven teacher quality" (Fuller, 2000, p. 18). The report fanned public fears concerning the economy, the cost of education, and U.S. world leadership. In his book, *School Choice*, Peter Cookson (1994) wrote, "Rightly or wrongly, many Americans see public education as having failed. In this sense, school choice grew out of our anxiety concerning our economic competitiveness (p. 69). The federal government began to study ways to boost education through the implementation of

strong, central school improvement strategies, such as grade-level standards and regular student assessment. Notions of accountability and competition, prominently presented in the Reagan-era report, remain major features of today's thinking about school policies and school choice.

As the economy improved throughout the 1980's, so did faith in the business goals of competition and consumerism. The issue of increasing school excellence through competition was introduced by John Chubb and Terry Moe in their classic book from 1990: *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*. Using reasoning that echoes business boardrooms, Chubb and Moe argued that, by allowing parents to choose among the schools their children could attend; better schools would thrive while lower-quality schools would go out of business. The broad assumption of school choice as a marketing strategy is that parents will make informed decisions about quality education, monitor their children's progress, and remain in or leave their school if it no longer meets their expectations (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Demographic Shifts

National concerns regarding low skills in the workforce were only part of the larger economic and social backdrop that would worry the educational establishment. During the 1970's and beyond, the U.S. had begun to absorb increasing numbers of families from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. In 1960, Latino students comprised 3% of the U.S. public school population; while in 1994 that population had risen to 15%. In California, students in the white majority were projected to become the minority within the not-too-distant future (Fuller & Elmore,

1996, p.7). Another area that impacted schools was the changing definition of the family. Where family configuration was once thought to include two parents with children, by the early 1990's this described only half of U.S. families with children. Children living in single-parent families--more likely to live on lower incomes and to have fewer opportunities to receive parental assistance with schoolwork--challenged the educational status quo (Fuller & Elmore, 1996, p.7).

These sweeping changes in the lives of American schoolchildren were responsible for "setting aside the assumption that universal remedies fit diverse ethnic neighborhoods and families" (Fuller & Elmore, 1996, p. 9). The policy of allowing families to choose their children's schools surfaced in this environment.

Essentially, school choice refers to various plans which share among them the elimination of centrally-determined, assigned school attendance boundaries. Magnet schools, alternative schools, and vouchers for families to use at a school of their choosing are some of the more common school choice options. The most recent choice option, charter schooling, has seen unprecedented growth.

Charter Schools

The first charter school laws were passed in Minnesota in 1991. By 1996, only five years later, there were 251 charter schools operating in the U.S. (Vergari, 1999, p.394). For the school year 2001-02, the U.S. Department of Education statistics show 2,348 charters operating in 40 states (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2002). The burgeoning numbers of charter schools indicate that increasing numbers of parents want to choose where and how their children will be educated. Americans

“over the past two decades have come to believe that parents have the political right to select a school of their choice for their children” (Fuller, 2000, p. 50).

Charter school legislation in the U.S. has been adopted at the state level; and, depending on the perceived purpose for the charters, different states authorize them differently. Some charter schools may emphasize parental and community involvement, some may stress creative pedagogy, and others may seek to better serve at-risk students. Charter schools are usually organized by groups of parents, teachers, and community members who wish to put their educational vision into practice. A school district, or sometimes the state itself, will review applications and grant permission for the charter’s organizers to operate a school. Although charter schools are publicly-funded, they are given control over their budgets, curriculum, and staff. Accountability procedures, too, vary from state to state, with formal reviews being conducted every 3-5 years. An underlying assumption is that the school will self-monitor for quality, in order to remain attractive to families and teachers (Vergari, 1999, p. 389).

Charter schools paradoxically enjoy support from a wide spectrum of political, religious, and ideological points of view. Early political supporters of charter schools, including then-President Clinton, viewed them as a means of offering school choice while maintaining some degree of control over the use of public funds. Senator Gary Hart stated: “It seemed possible to us to craft a legislative proposal that did not sacrifice the attractive features of the voucher movement--namely, choice of schools, local control, and responsiveness to clients--

while still preserving the basic principles of public education: that it be free, non-sectarian, and nondiscriminatory” (Cookson & Berger, 2002, p. 90). Charter schools and choice options appeal to many of the groups whose educational interests have thus far been discussed: progressives seeking holistic education, African Americans and Latinos who seek more culturally-supportive schools, those who seek greater local control over their own institutions, individuals who believe the school system is failing their children, and those who wish to invigorate public education by allowing consumers to demand the services they desire. The heavy emphasis on lock-step academic achievement and standardized testing--today’s public school model imposed by the federal government--has begun to feel oppressive to some parents, who increasingly choose small schools where relationships can be developed (Marshak, 2003, p. 230).

Families with conservative thinking, who have historically favored the individual’s right to pursue private interests (Fuller, 2000, p. 140), parents who would like their children to attend school in environments more suited to their religious values, and those who resist the unresponsiveness of highly-bureaucratic traditional public schools, can now find and choose a school to their liking. In the fall of 1999, one in four children no longer attended their assigned neighborhood school (Fuller, 2000, p. 42).

Open Enrollment in California

In 1992, California’s public school choice pallet primarily consisted of magnet schools, and the newly-authorized charter school legislation. The face of the

California neighborhood school was on the brink of changing forever. In 1993's Assembly Bill 1114, the state legislature created and mandated the Intra-district Attendance Program and it passed into California Education Code; requiring the governing board of all school districts to ensure that "the parent or guardian of each school-aged child who is a resident in the district may select the school the child shall attend." It further stipulates that racial and ethnic balance must be maintained, that students living within the attendance area may not be displaced by other students who choose to attend that school, and that an unbiased selection process of enrollment must be maintained (CA Education Code, 35160).

The ability to choose their child's school empowers parents in an unprecedented manner. In school districts that might have been unresponsive to parent concerns in the past, the opportunity to enroll one's child in a more like-minded environment is not only satisfying, but it gives clout to parental concerns. Parents whose children's schools are underperforming are now able to enroll in a school which is achieving better results. This provision is one of the central tenets of No Child Left Behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

The range of public education choices available to families currently includes: the right to request a certain teacher at their child's school; magnet schools within the public school system which emphasize certain curricular areas or curriculum delivery methods; attendance at traditional public schools with open enrollment throughout the school district (intra-district transfer); attendance at a public school outside of the family's residence area (inter-district transfer); and public charter

schools. This array of school choices falls within the public school system: financial support is derived from state and federal funding. Additionally, some states have voucher or tax-credit programs that allow families to send their children to private schools (Raywid, 1985).

While school choice can refer to these many options, the research for this thesis examines parental attitudes in Longview School District in relation to families choosing intra-district transfers. Within the larger context of school choice, intra-district transfers may have been among the most frequent arrangements parents pursued prior to considering other options.

The Issue of Equity

In large urban areas, families have many more types of schools from which to choose than do families in rural areas. The movement towards school choice can be traced to efforts to offer equal educational opportunities for all students; yet, ironically, a major issue surrounding choice options is precisely the issue of equity (Ogawa & Dutton, 1997; Raywid, 1985; Smrekar & Goldberg, 1999).

An examination of the patterns of choice, in relation to which parents choose and which parents do not choose to move their children to other schools, reveals significant effects on school demographics and on academic outcomes for all students. These patterns seem to be having an impact on how we provide an education for students in our pluralistic society. School administrators are increasingly interested in learning what families are seeking for their children's educations. These issues are reflected in the survey results analyzed in this thesis.

Factors That Influence School Choice

In the book, *Who Chooses? Who Loses?*, Bruce Fuller and Richard F. Elmore explain that there is no single feature that families seek when they change their children's school; rather, families show considerable diversity in how they search for a new school. Some parents even choose not to participate in school choice; "continuing to send their daughter or son to the neighborhood school even when they suspect it is of lower quality than alternative schools" (Fuller & Elmore, 1996, p.13). When asked why they remain, instead of choose a better school, non-choosing parents indicate that they prefer the familiarity, proximity to home, and ethnic solidarity of their neighborhood school (Fuller & Elmore, 2006, p.14).

Claire Smrekar and Ellen Goldring studied magnet school enrollment in St. Louis and Cincinnati in their book entitled *School Choice in Urban America*. They examined which families are most apt to choose, for what reasons, and the information they employ in making their decisions to change their children's school. In findings similar to other surveys reported in the school choice literature, parents often have cited their reasons for choosing a new school based on several factors, including the quality of the academic program; convenience of transportation; the potential for more interaction with higher socioeconomic status students; and the racial/ethnic makeup of the student body. Some parents also report that academic gains are not their first goal in choosing a new school; rather, their top priority is having a school environment where their religious, ethical, ethnic and cultural values can be imparted to their children. Families whose primary concern is that their

children receive religious instruction usually enroll their children in private, religiously-affiliated schools (Martinez, 1995).

Although there is not uniform consensus concerning qualities that influence parents to exercise school choice, Smrekar & Goldring (1999) found that parents from lower-income families tend to be more concerned about the availability of transportation than are parents from higher-income families. Parents from lower-income families also report that they choose a school in order to give their children a change of friends; to provide a change of environment; or to attempt to keep their children out of trouble. They report that they look to send their children to a school in a safer environment than that found in their neighborhoods (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999, p. 42).

In some cases, parents do not have a great deal of information about the various schools from which they might choose. In Fuller and Elmore's school choice study that involved 71 African American families, none of the parents or students had ever visited the schools they chose. The study reported that "factors such as perceived status or popularity of a school--the designer label--played a major role in the choices these families made" (Fuller & Elmore, 1996, p. 36).

The school choice literature also provides evidence that many parents choose a new school simply to get away from the former one. One Cincinnati study found that parents reported making their choice based on information from friends, neighbors, and family members. In the study, 56.7% of school choice families, across all social classes, decided to move their children to another school on the basis

of talking with friends. This research also found differences in the sources of information used by lower-income families than those used by higher-income families (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999, p.38). Less educated, usually lower-income, families may not feel as comfortable entering the school environment to attend a promotional open house, to make appointments to sit in on various teachers' classrooms, or to read the schools' informational packets.

Families Who Exercise School Choice Options

Numerous studies of the characteristics of school choice families clearly have indicated that those parents who choose to move their children to other schools are from families with higher socioeconomic status with regard to income, education, and employment (Raywid, 1985; Archbald, 1996; Fuller & Elmore, 1996; Ogawa & Dutton, 1997). Findings from states throughout the U.S. as well as from other countries (such as Minnesota's statewide open enrollment program, the Milwaukee Voucher Program, San Antonio's school choice program, and Great Britain's enrollment policies) all reveal that parents who choose their children's schools are 1) more highly educated--particularly the mothers; 2) more involved in their children's schooling--both at home and in the school itself; and 3) more comfortable interacting within the educational environment. It has additionally been shown that children with higher academic achievement are more likely to be enrolled in a choice school (Martinez, 1995, p. 492; Fuller & Elmore, 1996, p. 54).

In 1993, the U.S. Department of Education conducted a national telephone

survey that focused on school choice. Responses from a representative sample of 12,680 parents from all 50 states and the District of Columbia showed that:

Clearly there is a difference between parents who choose public schools or private schools for their children....In sum, the national scene in relation to school choice reveals that white, affluent parents tend to choose private schools; African American parents with low incomes tend to choose schools within the public school system; and middle-class parents tend to send their children to assigned public schools, although they also make choices for their children's education by deciding where to live.

(Hsieh & Shen, 2001, p. 90)

Consequences of School Choice

The issue of socioeconomic polarization in a school choice environment is readily apparent. If the more highly-educated families--and those more involved in their children's schooling--are choosing to send their better-achieving students to schools of choice, what happens to the schools that the remaining students attend? In his 1998 study of the educational consequences of voucher programs, Levin hypothesized that schools "not chosen" would have increased student segregation by socioeconomic status (SES), which would exacerbate inequality of opportunity because the aggregate SES of a school seems to have an impact on achievement--a variable which is found to be independent of the effect of the student's individual SES on her achievement (Levin, 1998, p. 382). It would seem likely, then, to expect lower achievement scores in the schools left populated by students whose families

have been less involved in their education; families who are themselves poorer and less educated. Correspondingly, “Evidence from over thirty years of research has clearly established that the social class a child is born into is crucial to its educational and life-chances” (Lauder, Hughes, & Watson, 1999, p. 83). Bruce Fuller’s research corroborates this point. He states, “Family background is a stronger predictor of children’s success in school than school qualities....Increasing parental choice will accelerate both the social stratification of schools and the gap in student performance between schools enrolling high concentrations of poor and working-class students versus those with predominantly white, middle-class students” (1996, p 190-191). Ogawa and Dutton (1997) also agree that “choice programs would worsen social stratification. Higher status parents, even among the poor, would move their children, who are often better students, to better schools, leaving behind schools with higher concentrations of low-achieving students from the poorest backgrounds” (p.350-351).

An image can be drawn, from these findings, of the brightest and best-supported students leaving their traditional public schools for a new choice, and the parents most likely to be involved in school activities are going with their children to the new school.

Finally, school choice could lead to a situation where “other schools would be left with parents who do little to actively support their children’s education. This seems to add further evidence to the contention that choice could heighten rather

than reduce social stratification in schools” (Ogawa & Dutton, 1997, p. 351; Lauder Hughes, & Watson, 1999. p. 83).

In their book, *Trading in Futures*, Lauder, Hughes, & Watson (1999) conducted a longitudinal study of whether or not school enrollments become less polarized as more parents learn about their option to choose a school. Those who support the role of schooling in a market economy believe that the initial awareness of the more highly-educated and economically successful parents will become generalized in time and that all families will eventually become involved in school choice.

In their study, Lauder et al (1999) chose to research four state schools in Green City, New Zealand. Socioeconomically, the city has a diverse population of white middle class, multi-ethnic working class (Pacific Island and Maori), and high SES families. Following the removal of zoning on school intakes, there was a flow of students from the higher SES families into a school at a more distant location, while the lowest SES and multi-ethnic families continued to attend their local schools. In cases where families from multi-ethnic backgrounds did choose to change schools, it was nevertheless “the relatively advantaged who were able to attend non-local schools.” It was additionally found that the exit of the higher SES students from working class schools induced a downward spiral in the achievement scores, as these schools lost their more advantaged students. Because school funding is tied to enrollment, these schools consequently had even less resources available to

educate the more educationally-challenged student clientele with whom they have been left (p.95-96).

Conclusion

In an era that has put educational outcomes in the forefront, the most far-reaching reform has been the policy of allowing parents to have school choice. The American public has shown ever-greater favor towards allowing parents to choose the school their children will attend; to the degree that it is believed to be a political right (Fuller, 2000, p. 51-52).

Roots of the choice movement have been traced to ill-received efforts to equalize racial balance by means of busing African American students into more-affluent, white schools. The seeming academic failure of America's public schools, as well as the inflexible policies of public schooling, has led the public to seek alternative educational settings. Magnet schools, charters, and private schools funded by vouchers lay claim to values that are admired by today's society: innovation, local control, improved methodology, and smaller, more personal environments where families feel a sense of community.

Research studies into the kinds of families who choose against their traditional public school reveal that they are better-educated and more affluent. In addition, it has been shown that school choice has contributed to a polarization of socioeconomic groups, which has exacerbated the academic decline of those schools left with students whose economic disadvantage has been shown to be linked with lower achievement (Tempes, 2001, p. 24-26).

Longview School District

Pseudonyms are used for the school district, schools, principals, and teachers whose actual names appear in the following research. The pseudonym Longview reflects the district's reputation for the implementation of thoughtful innovations. Located in a small city in rural northern California, the district is composed of several elementary schools, two middle schools, and a high school. As mentioned in the introduction, this research initially emerged from curiosity over why parents were moving their children out of some district schools and into others. Local newspaper articles, school district communications, and California Department of Education (CDE) statistics confirmed the issue of declining student enrollment throughout the county and within Longview School District. I learned that some Longview elementary schools had experienced losses of up to 24% of their students between 1998 and 2002. During this same period, the overall decline in the district's total student enrollment had been only 7% (CDE.ca.gov/dataquest). Because "...it has been estimated that only 15 to 20 percent of parents need to take their children away from a school before it becomes economically non-viable" (Lauder, Hughes, & Watson, 1999, p. 39), such losses are indeed serious for the schools.

This research was designed to answer the following three questions:

1. What are parents' reasons for choosing intra-district transfers to move their children from one school in the district to another school in the district?
2. What information do parents offer to school or district personnel when they become dissatisfied and choose to transfer their children into another school?

3. What are the reasons parents are choosing to keep their children at their neighborhood schools in the district?

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Rationale

Based on my concern about the steady decline in enrollment at my school, I wanted to discover the roots and meaning behind the families' choices to remain in or to leave their neighborhood schools. I discussed the research proposal with the district superintendent for his comments, suggestions, and approval.

The superintendent was extremely interested in discovering the reasons that families were choosing to move their children outside of the district through inter-district transfers. Had I been interested in researching inter-district transfers, he offered assistance in gathering that information by providing \$25.00 per family as an incentive to attend a focus group intended to glean information about their choices. He seemed disappointed that I continued to be primarily interested in a school-by-school, intra-district choice; but he nevertheless gave his approval to the project. He made the practical suggestion that I should survey the parents at Sorrel Elementary School, the most sought-after elementary school in the district. The superintendent emphasized that parents at Sorrel had a good track record for returning district paperwork, and they would surely provide information about why they were choosing to attend there.

This research study later became the basis of my M.A. Ed. Thesis. I conducted identical research at three schools within the Longview School District. In all instances, the superintendent of Longview Schools and the individual schools'

principals granted permission to mail the surveys to the families. Similarly, the Humboldt State University Committee for the Protection of Human Rights in Research reviewed and approved the survey instrument and research procedures during each phase of the study.

The results of the initial survey at Sorrel Elementary (2000) provided information which surprised me, and I wanted to know if parents whose children attended other schools in the district made school choices based on similar reasons.

A local journal published an article in the spring of 2001 that piqued my interest in Alder School. It said: “Alder Elementary, located among the housing projects, is one of the socioeconomically poorest in the Longview School District. A number of students come from homes where English is the second language. Not many of the parents have a college education. Few students have computers at home” (Doran, 2001, p. 7). The article nevertheless pronounced the school “a certified winner,” and reported that based on its STAR test scores, Alder had been ranked in the top 10 percent of all California schools having a similar socioeconomic profile. It stated, “In fact, in its demographic band, the school ranks No. 4 in the entire state.” The article highlighted some of funding advantages at Alder; such as Title 1, due to its lower socioeconomic status. It also pointed out programmatic opportunities, such as extra tutoring, that Alder offered (Doran, p. 7). While Sorrel School’s secretary had proudly told me that her school was the “elite of the elite;” within the state’s socioeconomic band, Alder School counted among the academically elite.

I met with the principal of Alder School to discuss conducting my research there. She, too, had wondered why parents were transferring their children to other schools: between 1996 and 2001, the enrollment at Alder had dropped from 467 students to 353: a 24% decrease (CDE.ca.gov/dataquest). The survey of Alder School parents occurred in the spring of 2001.

In August, 2001, the state released State Testing and Accountability Reporting (STAR) test scores for all schools. The scores from Longview School District revealed that another school--Ferngrove--stood out in several ways. In 2001-02 Ferngrove had the district's highest percentage of students who qualified for free or reduced meals (94.9%), enrolled the highest percentage of English Language Learners (22.7%), and it had the lowest standardized test scores. Enrollment statistics showed a 14.6% decrease in student enrollment from 2000-01 to 2001-02 alone (CDE.ca.gov/dataquest). In order to learn why parents chose to remain at this school, Ferngrove became the site of the final survey, which took place in the spring of 2002.

The survey research aimed to identify the reasons that motivated parents to request an intra-district transfer for their children, or to have their children remain in their neighborhood school. The qualitative data collected through these surveys describes the reasoning involved in making school choice decisions for children attending the three schools; Sorrel, Alder, and Ferngrove.

The Survey Instrument

The survey includes several key questions (Appendix A, p. 67, 68). As previously mentioned, Humboldt State University's Committee on Human Subject Research had reviewed and approved the survey.

The survey's introductory statement assures respondents of anonymity and explains that their child's teacher and principal will never see their individual response. I wanted parents to feel comfortable in responding honestly; without worrying that their children might be treated adversely for any opinions they expressed.

The survey introduction also points out insights the data might reveal regarding the effect school choice has had on the various schools within the district: Have schools become more responsive, due to parental choice options? For those who have exercised school choice transfer, are they happier at their new school?

Five of the survey questions direct parents to respond with checkmarks. The questions ask whether parents have been made aware of their right to choose schools and whether the family could transport their children to a new school, should they wish to have them attend a school in a different neighborhood. Other questions in this section ask whether or not parents have exercised their choice option; what schools their children have attended in Longview School District; and which of those schools they had chosen to leave.

Survey questions six through nine request parents to write short-answer statements. Question six asks parents to indicate the reasons that led them to

exercise a school-choice option. The question includes some examples of possible reasons: academics, the neighborhood, teachers, special curriculum, friends, reputation, school calendar and/or hours of operation, proximity to home or child care, and homework policies. Finally, this question asks respondents to clarify their own particular reasons for having moved their children to other schools.

Question seven inquires whether parents informed anyone at their former schools about the reasons they were leaving. The answers to this question might reveal if schools are receiving information concerning parents' and students' needs; particularly if those needs were so great as to cause a family to choose a new school.

In question eight, parents are given an opportunity to discuss whether or not they are satisfied with their new school. Parent descriptions of the positive and negative aspects of their new school could contribute to a broader understanding of the reasons underlying their utilization of a school-choice option.

The final short-answer question, number nine, offers parents the opportunity to address any additional thoughts about school choice. This open-ended question intends to elicit original concerns and opinions related to school choice.

The survey design for questions 10 through 13 aims to gather demographic information from the responding parents. The section explains that these questions are for the purposes of analysis; and they ask parents to indicate their ages, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and present job titles/positions. Parents also are asked to indicate how many children are in their families. This demographic data would

potentially reveal patterns among those families who choose and those who do not choose to move their children to other schools in the district.

The identical data-collection method and survey instrument were used at all three schools. Each family with children attending the school received the survey via the postal service; along with a stamped, self-addressed envelope to encourage easy return.

I read the completed surveys as they arrived in the mail; keeping a notebook on various responses and recording my personal reaction to the information. I originally organized the surveys according to the date they arrived, but I later color-coded the parents' replies into the categories which are shown in the Results Section of this thesis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 123-172).

Limitations

Survey questions six through nine are short-answer questions that require the parents to write in English. I recognized that this type of response might diminish or eliminate the voices of parents who were less literate in English, but the value of hearing the parents' perspectives in their own words ultimately took precedence. In retrospect, a pilot survey would have shown that the English-only and written format excluded many parents, particularly at Alder and Ferngrove Schools.

Oral interviews, conducted with the assistance of interpreters when necessary, would also have yielded more complete information from the families at Alder and Ferngrove.

A second-request survey would certainly have garnered additional, completed surveys. Since the returned surveys were anonymous, and no coding had been pre-arranged, families who required a follow-up mailing could not be identified. The financial costs for a complete second mailing were prohibitive. As it is, the lower numbers of survey responses from Alder and Ferngrove Schools require a cautious approach to generalizations.

Other limitations occur in the survey instrument itself. Questions two and four, which intended to explore schools that lost enrollment due to family relocation versus family choice, appear to have confused respondents. Some parents indicated identical schools for both questions; others said they had never attended another school, although they later stated they had chosen schools more than once.

The four final questions in the survey request demographic information, such as the parents' ages, job title, and number of children. Parents' responses to these questions were inconsistent and incomplete. For example, some parents cited their job titles, but not their ages. Some only wrote how many children they had. For these reasons, I have used demographic data from the California Department of Education (CDE) Dataquest website. I have since learned that people respond more consistently to demographic questions when the choices are offered in a more structured format, such as 'Age: () 20-30, () 31- 40, () 41-50.'

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

In the spring of 2000, there were 289 families enrolled at Sorrel Elementary School. The school secretary prepared address labels to send the survey to each of the families who had children enrolled there. Within 24 days of mailing them, 131 Sorrel parents (45.3%) had responded. In the following year, the second set of 226 surveys went out to the parents of students attending Alder Elementary; and 37 parents returned them (16.4%). In 2002, the final surveys were mailed to the 160 families of Ferngrove Elementary students; only 22 parents (13.8%) returned them. Results for the rate of return are shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Parent Survey Response Rates

Percentage Returned	Sorrel	Alder	Ferngrove
	45.3%	16.4%	13.8%
	n = 131	n = 37	n = 22

Note: Percentages are calculated using the ratio of the total surveys returned to the total surveys mailed to parents.
N = actual number of responses.

Survey questions one through four request parents to respond by checking the applicable answers. Results for these four questions are shown in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2: Parent Responses to Questions 1 through 4

Survey Questions	Sorrel	Alder	Ferngrove
Question 1. Knew policy	96.2% n = 126	89.2% n = 33	72.7% n = 16
Question 2. Families whose children have attended other schools	22.9% n = 30	29.7% n = 11	40.9% n = 9
Question 3. Able to transport	93.9% n = 123	70.3% n = 26	40.9% n = 9
Question 4. Exercised choice to change schools	19.1% n = 25	29.7% n = 11	27.3% n = 6

Note: Percentages represent the ratio of parent responses for the question to the total number of returned surveys.
N = actual number of responses.

Responses to question one show that most parents at Sorrel (96.2%) knew about the district's open enrollment policy. Fewer parents at Alder (89.2%) and even fewer parents at Ferngrove (72.7%) reported knowing about the intra-district choice option. One Ferngrove parent wrote: "I would like more information on how to choose."

Survey question two requests information concerning which district schools the children in the family had previously attended. Table 4.3 (p. 39) shows the parents' responses to survey question two.

The responses received for question two show that the majority of parent respondents remain within their neighborhood school: 101 Sorrel families (77.1%), 26 Alder families (70.3%), and 13 Ferngrove families (59.1%) had always attended their neighborhood school. An Alder respondent's comments reflect an attitude expressed by many parents in relation to their child's school: "I chose Alder from the start and have been extremely happy with all aspects...."

Responses to question two also show that Sorrel School drew 12 students (9.2%) from inter-district schools, while Alder and Ferngrove each attracted two students from other districts.

Table 4.3: Question Two – District Schools Previously Attended

Schools Previously Attended	Sorrel	Alder	Ferngrove
Alder	0.00	70.3% n = 26	4.5% n = 1
Ferngrove	2.3% n = 3	8.1% n = 3	59.1% n = 13
Lupin	3.8% n = 5	8.1% n = 3	13.6% n = 3
Oceanview	3.1% n = 4	8.1% n = 3	4.5% n = 1
Redwood	2.3% n = 3	8.1% n = 3	0.00
Sorrel	77.1% n = 101	0.00	4.5% n = 1
Trillium	3.1% n = 4	8.1% n = 3	18.2% n = 4
Woodway	3.1% n = 4	5.4% n = 2	9.1% n = 2
Schools in other districts	9.2% n = 12	5.4% n = 2	9.1% n = 2
Total families who have attended other schools	22.9% n = 30	29.7% n = 11	40.9% n = 9

Note. Percentages represent the ratio parent responses for individual schools to the total number of returned surveys. N = the actual number of responses. Some families previously attended more than one school.

Survey question three requests information concerning parents' ability to transport their children to another school, outside of their neighborhood. Table 4.4 (p.40) shows the parents' responses to survey question three.

Table 4.4: Question Three – Specific Concerns Regarding Transportation

Transportation	Sorrel	Alder	Ferngrove
Able to transport	93.9% n = 123	70.3% n = 26	40.9% n = 9
Could transport, with difficulty	2.3% n = 3	2.7% n = 1	4.5% n = 1
Moved, in order to live within school boundaries	3.8% n = 5	0.00	0.00
Safety concerns about children walking, due to discontinued use of buses	0.00	16.2% n = 6	0.00
Feel that no buses interfere with exercising choice	0.00	0.00	13.6% n = 3

Note: Percentages represent the ratio of parent comments on the individual items to the total number of returned surveys. N = the actual number of responses.

Parent responses from the three schools show shared concerns, although parents at each school also indicate some unique situations. For instance, only Sorrel parents indicated that they had relocated, prior to open enrollment, so that their children could attend the school of their choice. Alder parents expressed concern about children’s safety since “door-to-door” busing to school had ended with open enrollment. One of these parents wrote, “I strongly disapprove of the loss of the school buses to transport kids to and from schools. I fear for the safety of all our youth!” At Ferngrove, some parents indicated they could not make a school choice, due to lack of transportation.

Survey question five requests information concerning which schools parents had chosen to leave. Table 4.5 shows the parents' responses to question five.

Table 4.5: Questions 5 – Parents Who Exercised Choice and Schools They Exited

Schools the Parents Chose to Leave	Sorrel	Alder	Ferngrove
Alder	1.5% n = 2	0.00	0.00
Ferngrove	2.3% n = 3	5.4% n = 2	0.00
Lupin	3.8% n = 5	2.7% n = 1	0.00
Oceanview	3.8% n = 5	5.4% n = 2	9.1% n = 2
Redwood	1.5% n = 2	2.7% n = 1	0.00
Sorrel	0.00	0.00	0.00
Trillium	3.0% n = 4	8.1% n = 3	9.1% n = 2
Woodway	3.0% n = 4	5.4% n = 2	9.1% n = 2
Total parents who used school choice (Information from question four, Table 4. 2, pg. 38)	19.1% n = 25	29.7% n = 11	27.3% n = 6

Note: Percentages represent the ratio of parent responses on the individual items to the total number of returned surveys. N = the actual number of responses.

At Sorrel, 25 parents (19.1%) reported having made a school choice. At Alder, 11 parents (29.7%) had chosen to transfer their children, and 6 Ferngrove parents (27.3%) had exercised school choice.

A comparison among the Longview schools shows that more families deliberately transferred away from Trillium School, Oceanview, and Woodway. With the exception of Sorrel, which showed no intra-district exit, the various schools all experienced loss of enrollment due to transfer.

Survey question six requests information concerning the reasons parents chose to transfer their children to another school. Certain themes emerged

specifically among parents at Sorrel and Alder Schools. Table 4.6 shows the parents' collective responses to this question.

Table 4.6: Question 6 – Reasons that Parents Chose to Transfer Their Children to a New School

Reasons for choosing a new school	Sorrel	Alder	Ferngrove
Academic deficiency at former school	2.3% n = 3	8.1% n = 3	9.1% n = 2
Active parent involvement sought	0.76% n = 1	0.00	0.00
Did not like their young children to be near the high school	3.8% n = 5	0.00	0.00
No after-school program	0.00	5.4% n = 2	0.00
Playground and school appearance	3.8% n = 5	0.00	0.00
Proximity to childcare	3.8% n = 5	2.7% n = 1	4.5% n = 1
Proximity to home or workplace	3.8% n = 5	5.4% n = 2	9.1% n = 2
Program options, (year-round school), G.A.T.E., special education	1.5% n = 2	0.00	4.5% n = 1
Reputation	3.8% n = 5	0.00	0.00
Socioeconomic concerns	9.9% n = 13	2.7% n = 1	4.5% n = 1
Troubles with principal/teacher	4.6% n = 6	10.8% n = 4	0.00

Note: Percentages represent the ratio of parent comments on the individual items to the total number of returned surveys. N = the actual number of responses.

Four reasons for transferring children to another school appear only in survey responses from parents with children attending Sorrel. One of these--parent participation--is noted by only one parent; yet she valued parent participation enough to transfer her child to Sorrel in an effort to experience that aspect of schooling.

Another of Sorrel parents' unique concerns is the quality of school playgrounds and general school appearance. One of these parents wrote that a school's appearance is "important in school choice."

The third reason that was specific to Sorrel is reported by five parents who chose to leave a previous elementary school (Lupin) because it was located directly across the street from Longview High School. One parent stated, "Our child attended Lupin School for one year. I did not like the school due to its proximity to Longview High School. The high school kids were smoking in front of the kindergarten drop-off area." Another parent wrote that "Lupin was too close to the high school for my comfort."

The unspecified quality of school reputation is the fourth factor that appears solely in Sorrel parents' statements regarding reasons for transferring their children. Five respondents (3.8%) said they chose to send their children to Sorrel because, "We heard many wonderful things about Sorrel."

The special concern expressed by Alder parents who chose to transfer their children involves interest in having an after-school program for their children.

Parents at all three schools reported that the school's proximity to home, to childcare, and to the parent's workplace influences their school-choice decisions. One parent wrote that he "chose Sorrel Elementary primarily because the preschool we had chosen provided after and before school transportation to Sorrel and on days we worked we had no other option." Another Sorrel family explained that they "Live in Barberry, work in Longview. We wanted to be able to take the girls to

school each day and be easily accessible in case of emergency or special occasion. I love the contact I'm allowed to have with the girls' teachers."

Respondents at all schools indicated that problems with a teacher or principal caused them to transfer their children to another school. In regard to her child's previous school, one Alder parent wrote, "My daughter had a teacher for two years. The teacher did not like my daughter--she held her back and I overrode the decision and put her in (another school)... she caught up." A Sorrel parent responded that, "We did not like the conduct of the principal on how things were dealt with (the children). We... would not tolerate such behavior from a key adult when it concerned children and role modeling."

Parent respondents from all three schools also targeted academic deficits at their previous schools as the factor that caused them to transfer their children. One family stated that the previous school was "teaching from books published in the 60's and 70's." Another parent said she transferred her children to Sorrel because she wanted them to "attend an academically challenging school which would prepare them for junior high." A Ferngrove respondent said he had chosen to enroll his child there "...for academics. Because my son needed year-round schooling to keep him up with the children in the same grade level."

Negative perceptions about the socioeconomic composition of the former school account for the most frequently-mentioned response to question six. Parent respondents from Sorrel targeted this concern above all others (9.9 %). Some parents wrote brief statements such as "neighborhood;" but many parents elaborated

on this topic. One parent reported having transferred her child because the former school's "...families were not clean (lots of lice); did not like all the different races, bad influences, as kids got older they got rougher more troubled kids, no parent involvement, dysfunctional (sic) families."

Survey question seven requests information concerning whether or not parents had discussed their reasons for moving to a new school. Table 4.7 (p. 46) shows the parents' responses to survey question 7.

Few parents (12.1%) among the total respondents indicated that they had made the schools aware of their reasons for transferring their children. When parents did inform their schools, a difference of opinion or problem with the former school's teacher or principal appears frequently. One parent wrote, "I talked to the teacher. She thought I was trying to push my daughter too hard. I moved her to...Sorrel and she has adjusted socially and always excels."

Parents also volunteered information when academic needs led to school transfer. One parent from Ferngrove wrote, "Yes, at the time we discussed the advantages of my son in a year-round school and how he may better retain information as the school breaks were...shorter." A Sorrel family stated that they had expressed "...our declining confidence in the school and disappointment in its lack of response, or concern, to its weak performance areas."

Table 4.7: Question 7 – Did You Tell About Your Decision to Transfer? What Did You Discuss?

Themes of discussion	Sorrel	Alder	Ferngrove
Total survey respondents who discussed school-choice transfer with former school	10.7% n = 14	13.5% n = 5	18.2 % n = 4
Academic Concerns	2.3% n = 3	2.7% n = 1	4.5% n = 1
Afraid to say anything/chose to say nothing	0.76% n = 1	2.7% n = 1	0.00
Appearance of buildings/playground	0.76% n = 1	0.00	0.00
Childcare	0.76% n = 1	0.00	0.00
Disagreements with teacher	2.3% n = 3	2.7% n = 1	0.00
Disagreements with principal	2.3% n = 3	0.00	4.5% n = 1
General Environment	0.00	2.7% n = 1	4.5% n = 1
Location/ proximity to friends	0.76% n = 1	0.00	4.5% n = 1
Socioeconomic (rough kids)	0.76% n = 1	2.7% n = 1	0.00

Note: Percentages represent the ratio of parent comments on the individual items to the total number of returned surveys.

N = the actual number of responses

Survey question eight requests information concerning parent satisfaction with their new school. Table 4.8 (p. 47) shows the parents' responses to question eight. Three parents appear lukewarm, commenting that their new school is "okay" and that they like it "better than...the last one," but the vast majority of respondents at all three schools express enthusiasm about their new school. One wrote, "I love Sorrel School....My kids have not missed a day of school since we started at Sorrel." An Alder parent wrote, "Love it! My son has a positive outlook again. He loves

school again and he doesn't come home upset every day. He comes home happy every day. No more tears.”

Table 4.8: Question 8 – How Did You Feel About Your New School?

Response Themes	Sorrel	Alder	Ferngrove
Total responses	32.8% n = 43	16.2% n = 6	40.9% n = 9
Excellent teachers	3.8% n = 5	0.00	13.6% n = 3
Great! Love it	22.1% n = 29	10.8% n = 4	9.1% n = 2
My kids like it, so I like it	2.3% n = 3	0.00	0.00
Parent Participation is good here	1.5% n = 2	0.00	0.00
Principal was better at our old school	0.00	0.00	4.5% n = 1
Same as before (fair, okay)	1.5% n = 2	0.00	4.5% n = 1
Socioeconomic concerns	1.5% n = 2	0.00	0.00
Transportation is the deciding factor	0.00	5.4% n = 2	4.5% n = 1
Year-round school is not offered	0.00	0.00	4.5% n = 1

Note: Percentages represent the ratio of parent comments on the individual items to the total number of returned surveys. N = the actual number of responses.

Some responses to question eight return to previous concerns. Two Sorrel parents addressed socioeconomic considerations about their new school. One of these wrote, “I think Sorrel School has a higher income student body. The children have better behavior than some of the other schools.” The other of these enthused, “It’s the only way it should be! My daughter is with the class of people I want her to be with. I feel she has a better chance to stay out of trouble at Sorrel.” A previous theme from Alder’s parents--transportation--also reappears. One of these parents

explained that the family had moved to a home near the school. S/he reported that she hadn't wanted to transfer her children to Alder, but that she was unable to transport them to their former school. She wrote that her children were "Uneasy at first: 'Tougher' children, unknown atmosphere, teachers, etc." A Ferngrove parent found his family in a similar situation.

Survey question nine requests information concerning any other comments parents might want to address regarding school choice in Longview School District. Table 4.9 shows the parents' responses to survey question nine.

Parents overwhelmingly agreed with the Sorrel parent who wrote, "I think it is a wonderful choice to give parents. Open enrollment gives me the choice of which school is most appropriate for my child and which school provides the best opportunities. I feel very strongly that open enrollment is most beneficial to our children!"

Table 4.9: Question Nine – Any Other Thoughts Regarding School Choice within Longview

Parent responses	Sorrel	Alder	Ferngrove
I like having an option!	21.4% n = 28	13.5% n = 5	22.7% n = 5
Better schools can be attended	2.3% n = 3	0.00	0.00
Childcare is easier to arrange	3.8% n = 5	2.7% n = 1	0.00
Competition improves schools	1.5% n = 2	0.00	0.00
Give priority to neighborhood kids	5.3% n = 7	0.00	0.00
Happy with original school	0.00	2.7% n = 1	0.00

I want to know more about choice	0.00	0.00	4.5% n = 1
Purchased a home there	1.5% n = 2	0.00	0.00
Socioeconomic	4.6% n = 6	0.00	0.00
Transportation is needed	2.3% n = 3	16.2% n = 6	18.2% n = 4
Used false address, before choice	1.5% n = 2	0.00	0.00
Why are people leaving Longview?	0.00	2.7% n = 1	0.00
Work to improve your neighborhood school	0.00	0.00	4.5% n = 1

Note: Percentages represent the ratio of parent comments on the individual items to the total number of returned surveys. N = the actual number of responses.

Remembering the period before open enrollment, one Sorrel parent wrote “When I was a child my parents lied to get a transfer so I could attend Sorrel Elementary. I’m glad I don’t have to do that! We have moved several times and have always kept the same school!” Another parent confided, “Before you could choose which school your child could attend, we used the grandparent’s address, which was in the Sorrel School (boundary).”

A concern for seven of the Sorrel parents who responded to this question involves ensuring that all children in the family can attend the same elementary school. One parent wrote, “I had a real scare recently when registering my second child for kindergarten. I was in line at 6 am in the morning! (20 People were ahead of me.) I still don’t know if she can attend the same school as her sister next year!” Similarly, parents who had purchased homes within Sorrel’s traditional boundaries now worried about their children being denied enrollment due to limited space. One

such parent wrote, “I feel that families living within the original school boundaries should be able to attend the school of that area.”

Respondents again returned to previously-mentioned themes: six parents from Sorrel praised school choice for allowing them to enroll their children in the socioeconomic environment in which they feel comfortable; while Alder and Ferngrove parents emphasized that the loss of bus transportation, which ceased with the advent of school choice, had created problems for them. Ten parents from those two schools used question nine to reiterate that they cannot transfer their children out of their neighborhood school without transportation.

Three parents from Sorrel echoed the school choice, market theory. One of these wrote, “I believe that within reason, where children go to school should be up to the parent--if 1 or more schools are always full, then maybe they are doing something right and the other lesser schools could learn from them, thus helping to share the popular rate (sic).”

Analysis of these survey results will focus on the thematic clusters of the parents’ responses. Comparisons will be drawn between the parents’ comments in this survey to those cited in school choice literature. The underlying meaning of the parents’ choice decisions and potential effects on the schools will additionally be examined and discussed.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS

Parent Access to School Choice

Analysis of the data from this survey research reveals many similarities between these findings and the school choice literature. While this research provides insight into the reasons some Longview School District parents chose to transfer their children to other schools in the district, it also raises questions about the manner in which the schools communicated with the children's' families and about the overall effects of intra-district enrollment. Finally, the findings suggest possibilities for more meaningful school choice options in the Longview School District.

Survey Response Rates

Sorrel School's parents received the first survey, and 131 (45.3%) parents returned their surveys. The return rate for the second and third surveys showed a significant drop: 37 (16.4%) Alder parents and only 22 (13.8%) Ferngrove parents completed the surveys. This striking difference between the three schools requires attention. A closer look at those schools offers several possible explanations for the lower rate of parent participation in the Alder and Ferngrove surveys.

The California Department of Education (CDE) collects many kinds of data on all schools in the state. Data reported during the final year of this research (2001-02) shows notable differences between the families who were attending Sorrel, Alder, and Ferngrove Schools.

The federally-subsidized school breakfast and lunch program is frequently used as a measure of family poverty. Students who qualify for free meals are living in families with incomes at 130% of the established poverty level. Students qualifying for reduced-price meals live in families with income levels at 131 – 185% of the poverty level (Rossi, 2006). In 2001-02, an average of 42.1% of the total students in the Longview School District were eligible to receive free or reduced meals. Alder School students far exceeded that average, with 85.5% of its students living on family incomes in the free and reduced bracket, while 94.9% of Ferngrove students were receiving free or reduced meals. At Sorrel, only 29.6% of the students came from families living within those levels of poverty (CDE.ca.gov/dataquest).

Cultural Capital

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu identified a complex system of advantages that are common to members of the middle class (Rofes & Stulberg, 2004; Lauder, Hughes, & Watson, 1999). Collectively known as cultural capital, in the field of education these advantages allow middle class parents to interact confidently in the school setting; while parents with less education, those in lower socioeconomic brackets, or families who speak little English feel less comfortable in the educational arena. The tasks of observing in a teacher's classroom, discussing problems with the school principal, and even making a school choice decision on behalf of their children are difficult for parents who are unfamiliar or unsure of their judgment in regard to schooling. Lauder, Hughes, & Watson (1999) address this situation in their book, *Trading in Futures*: "In contemporary education markets, cultural capital is

needed to determine which schools are best...knowledge of the rules of the game” (p. 29).

I believe that the lower socioeconomic levels and the associated decrease in cultural capital contributed to the lower rate of returned surveys from Alder and Ferngrove parents. The skills required to evaluate the survey questions and to express opinions undoubtedly overwhelmed some parents; causing them to opt out of participation in the survey. A parallel suggests itself to lowered participation in school choice decisions. It is possible that parents with lowered confidence in educational settings also opt to exercise no school choice on behalf of their children. M. W. Apple (2001) found this to be the case and wrote, “markets *systematically* privilege higher socio-economic status families through their knowledge and material resources. These are the families who are most likely to exercise choice....It is largely higher socio-economic status families who exit from public schools with mixed populations” (p. 417).

Language and Literacy Barriers

CDE’s dataquest website additionally tracks district and school percentages of students from non-English speaking backgrounds. A prominent difference again exists between Alder, Ferngrove, and Sorrel. In 2001-02 Longview district’s total of English Language Learners (ELL) was 9.4%. During that year, Alder had 15.6% ELL, Ferngrove enrolled 22.7% ELL students, and Sorrel School’s ELL enrollment was only 2.3% of its student population (CDE.ca.gov/dataquest).

Parents at all three schools received the identical survey. The English literacy skills necessary to complete the survey undoubtedly impacted the return rates at Alder and Ferngrove; with their higher populations of non-English speaking parents. I believe a similar dynamic occurs in many other aspects of school participation. For example, I recently learned that Longview School District administrators sent a very important special education announcement home with students. In it, parents were invited to attend a State Department of Education meeting. The letter contained two pages of information, written entirely in English. At the bottom of the back page, people who might need help reading the document were instructed to contact the school for assistance.

English-language and literacy demands could similarly bar some families from making intra-district or other school choice. In his book, *School Choice: The Struggle for the Soul of American Education*, Cookson (1994) wrote, “To make controlled choice work, a truly effective parent information and outreach program is essential” (p. 58). The data from question one, Table 4.2 (p. 38), show that fully 10.8% of Alder parents and 27.3% of Ferngrove respondents did not know about school-choice privileges. Demographic data for Sorrel School, showing more affluent and English-speaking parents, could account for that school’s higher awareness of school choice policy: only 3.8% of the parent at Sorrel said they were unaware of the intra-district choice option. The differences in awareness reported by parents in survey question one could result from the manner in which Longview School District presented the policy information to parents. I learned that parents

had been made aware of intra-district choice via notices mailed to parents' homes and articles in the newspaper. School choice literature addresses the issue of exclusion when school communications are presented in written English. Glenn (1991) wrote, "Urban environments include low-income parents, minority parents, non-English speaking parents--groups in which many members have neither automatic access to information about schools, nor knowledge of channels for getting information" (p. 89).

Transportation Difficulties Impede School Choice

Parents' responses to question three, (If you wanted to change your children to a different school, are you able to transport them?) revealed another difference that sharply separated families at Sorrel from families at Alder and Ferngrove Schools. Many parents at Sorrel (93.9%) indicated that they were able to transport their children; yet this was true for only 26 Alder respondents (70.3%) and 13 Ferngrove families (59.1%). Alder parents commented throughout the survey that they would like the district to provide bus transportation (Table 4.9, p. 48). One parent wrote, "...I am glad that choices are available. Buses should be available at all schools." Another respondent agreed and added, "I like the idea, but want buses available for transport. All this parental transport is wasteful and unnecessary." Ferngrove parents even stated that their lack of ability to transport their children prohibited their access to making a school choice (Table 4.4, p. 40). One parent commented, "I feel that if a person cannot afford to transport your child you are stuck with the school...you're in." (sic) Smrekar & Goldring (1999) found that

parents from lower-income families tend to be more concerned about the availability of transportation than are parents from higher-income families. The lack of transportation offers insight into the reason that some families remain in their neighborhood school.

In similar research, Lauder, Hughes, and Watson (1999) found that “The further students travel from home to attend a school, the higher their socioeconomic status is likely to be” (p.44). School-choice policy makers must carefully consider whether or not there is equitable access to high-quality schooling for all children.

Parent-Cited Reasons for Transferring Their Children

Survey responses to question six (Why did you change your children’s school?) showed that the groups of parents at the three schools had considerably different concerns. The most frequently-cited reason (9.9%) Sorrel School parents gave for moving their children from another school to Sorrel related to perceptions about socioeconomic status. Parent responses assume a strikingly emphatic tone when they discuss factors relating to social class. Sorrel parents expressed concerns about academic outcomes (“The teacher had so many languages going on...she didn’t have time to challenge the students.”); student social interactions (“...Our daughter fell in with a very bad crowd...”); health (“...the families were not clean...lots of lice.”); and their own potential interaction with parents in lower socioeconomic brackets. One respondent explained, “I did not like the reputation of the children who attend (the other school). My child would make friends with them, of course, and I would have to ‘approve’ of their families before he’d ever be able to

visit them at their homes. Too many of them I would not allow in my own home. It is snobbish. We are possibly overprotective.” Another respondent reported being happy that, at Sorrel, his daughter was “with the class of people I want her to be with.”

A theme that repeatedly appears in school choice literature concerns the stratifying effect of school choice. (Cookson, 1994; Fuller, 1996; Lauder, Hughes & Watson, 1999). Parent responses from Sorrel corroborate Cookson’s (1994) finding: “The blunt fact is that affluent white families are not eager to integrate their children’s schools with poor minority children” (p. 68).

Another 3.8% of Sorrel respondents answered that they chose to transfer their children due to “reputation.” Cookson (1994) found that “parents may not articulate their preferences in terms of the social class composition...perhaps; instead, they may think in terms of ‘reputation’” (p.44). As one Sorrel parent explained, “We chose (the) school due to its reputation among other parents.”

A further socioeconomic concern reported by an additional 3.8% of Sorrel respondents relates to the importance of the school’s playground and physical appearance. One parent acknowledged leaving a previous school because of its “poor playground with no grass,” while another said the family had visited other schools but “decided on Sorrel because of better playground.”

Based on the responses to question six and shown in Table 4.6 (p. 42), it is clear to me that school choice within the Longview School District is being used primarily by parents who want their children to attend school in a social environment

that feels comfortable to them. Studies of the desegregating effects of magnet schools indicate that specialized educational opportunities can entice student enrollment into more racially-mixed schools. In my experience in the Longview School District, the various schools offer largely similar programs. While there had been a year-round option at Ferngrove School, it was discontinued by 2002. During the time of this research, a Longview teacher with Montessori Education certification was working to obtain district permission to use Montessori methodology in a primary-grade classroom, but the proposal was initially struck down by the LSD School Board due to an apparent lack of parent interest in the program. I believe that Longview School District could maintain a more socioeconomically-balanced student population and attract intra- and inter-district transfer students by offering programs and academic specialty classes such as those found in magnet schools.

School Improvement via Parent Choice

One of the major questions this thesis seeks to determine the extent to which parents offer information to school or district personnel when they become dissatisfied and choose to transfer their children into another school.

Supporters of school choice as a reform strategy claim that competition for student enrollment will push schools to greater excellence and to greater consumer satisfaction. Parent responses to survey question seven (Did you tell your former school principal and/or teachers before you moved to another school? What did you discuss?), shown in Table 4.7 (p. 46), indicate that few Longview parents share any information with their schools prior to moving. Two parents stated that they were

unwilling to confront the principals and teachers at their former schools. One Sorrel parent had said nothing because, "...we didn't feel the principal would maintain confidentiality and our child would be adversely affected." Another, who reported a major disagreement with a former principal, had only spoken to the school's secretary about it; while an Alder parent explained that he had declined to discuss it with the former school's principal because "...he was not worth my time. If he cannot listen to me (By saying, "kids will do that") or try to help me." (sic) Another Alder parent reported that, "My daughter was being terrorized by some other students and I had talked to them when the problem arose but not when I decided to move her."

I came to see that Longview School District parents were not being welcomed to provide the type of information that would allow Longview to make changes that might result in increased parent satisfaction and possibly lead to increased enrollment in the district's schools. I believe that the district could learn about the reasons parents were deciding to move their children to other schools by conducting surveys or outreach interviews with families who transfer their children.

Choosing to Remain in the Neighborhood School

In an environment of choice, those parents who continue to enroll their children in a lower-performing school, such as Ferngrove, confound logical thinking. In their study of non-choosing families, Fuller and Elmore (1996) found that, "when asked why they remain, rather than choose a better school, non-choosing parents indicate that they prefer the familiarity, proximity to home, and ethnic solidarity of

their neighborhood school” (p. 14). Ferngrove parents responded similarly: many wrote that they liked the school’s attention to safety, caring attitude, and personal connection. One family responded that they were grateful to Ferngrove for providing a “safe, loving, and diverse place for children to learn.”

One Ferngrove parent wrote an entire letter, saying he could not adequately express all he wanted to say within the survey. He wrote that he knew he could change his child’s school, but he “...liked that the school principal and teachers understood that most of their families work. The free after-school program... programs for people who are E.S.L. (English as a Second Language) were the main reasons why I chose Ferngrove.” He further explained that school personnel were “...happy to see me when I pick my son up and know me by name. They ask about my family and my daughter, who will be starting school in the fall of 2003.” This parent wrote that he liked “...the quality of supervision...the teacher walks her class to the front of the school and waits with (my son) and the others until her class’s parents arrive, upon dismissal.” He concluded, “I am more than proud to say that my child attends Ferngrove.”

These responses from Ferngrove parents clearly underscore a regard for values beyond STAR testing and academic performance. Many parents who choose to take their children out of traditional public schools in order to enroll them in charter schools report that they want a smaller and more personal environment for their children; an escape from the highly structured, academically-focused nature of today’s public schools (Brouillette, 2002, p. 260, 261).

An article published in Phi Delta Kappan (November, 2003) described a study that identified employer-stated desirable job skills. A comparison of these attributes and characteristics of the educational environments likely to foster acquisition of these skills found “this will mean personalization, small schools, strong relationships developed over several years, common goals for all students, individual goals for every student, and many and varied uses of new communication technologies in ways that are intensely student-centered” (Marshak, p. 230). That description mirrors the qualities named by Ferngrove parents who chose to enroll their children in the school, in spite of its lower STAR scores. It is apparent that the safe, familiar neighborhood school continues to appeal to parents.

Another Ferngrove parent offered final thoughts on school choice as a school reform. She wrote, “I think that you should utilize the school in your neighborhood instead of transporting your child to another school. If you don’t like the school, why not try to help change it?” School districts, too, need to work to assure a high-quality, equitable education at all sites.

Effects of School Choice

The CDE dataquest website shows STAR results for all schools. The pattern emerges each year: Sorrel’s scores are consistently above the district’s average; Alder’s scores fall roughly into the average range, and Ferngrove’s scores are far below the district averages (CDE.ca.gov/dataquest).

Some parents at Sorrel discussed school choice in market terms. One respondent wrote, “It allows parents to choose the best! It should also tell the less

favorable schools a bunch! (Show them positive changes are necessary).” This attitude contrasts with the large body of school choice literature that supports the claim that “...family background is a stronger predictor of children’s success in school than school qualities” (Fuller & Elmore, 1996, p. 190; Lauder, Hughes, & Watson, 1999; Levin, 1998; Ogawa & Dutton, 1997). It seems clear that the lower Alder and Ferngrove STAR scores directly relate to the school’s lower socioeconomic composition and non-English speaking families; who often lack the qualities of cultural capital to academically support their children.

Demographic data show clear socioeconomic and achievement disparities among the Longview schools in this survey. Many parent participants indicated that they made school choices on the basis of social factors. The effects of segregation by school choice will continue to impact school achievement levels unless the district administration takes steps to assure equity. Martinez, Godwin, Kemerer, & Perma (1995) described school choice as a contributor to increased socioeconomic segregation and noted possible solutions that have been tried in other districts, such as enrollment quotas of low-income students at all schools (p. 485-501). Magnet schools offerings have additionally drawn students from diverse backgrounds.

Popularity of School Choice

Few parents indicated that they had communicated with Longview School District when they decided to transfer their children to a new school. Although school improvement cannot be traced from the district’s response to parental

interests or demands, survey responses show that one important effect of school choice is parent satisfaction.

School choice is extremely popular with Longview families. Cookson (1994) explains that “choice parents believe that the school their child is attending is better because it is selective...the very act of choosing creates an aura of specialness” (p. 87). Some parents reported that they formerly had to lie about their residence location in order for their children to attend a specific school: few people would willingly return to mandatory zoning attendance. Table 4.8 (p. 47) shows parent comments in support of school choice; including large numbers of parents who chose to send their children to their own neighborhood schools. Parents from all three schools applaud having a school choice option.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this thesis, I traced my interest in school choice to the impact of intra-district choice on student enrollment in the elementary school where I had been teaching. I wanted to understand the roots and meaning underlying parent decisions to transfer their children, and I hoped to discover ways that schools might become more responsive to family needs. I additionally wanted to learn what factors motivated parents to remain in their neighborhood schools.

A review of school choice literature, with particular emphasis on the historical roots of the movement, places the *Brown v Board of Education* Supreme Court decision at the heart of school choice in the U.S. Desegregation of schools, as well as social and political shifts, demanded a change in traditional neighborhood schools. The review also examines the various manners in which public educational choice is offered; such as magnet schools, voucher systems, charter schools, inter- and intra-district school choice.

School choice bounded into popularity, and 25% of U.S. schoolchildren currently attend a school of choice. It is important to remember, however, that school choice is a relatively new policy: prior to 1993, California students attended schools that lay within assigned geographical boundaries.

The Humboldt State University Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects and the superintendent of Longview School District granted approval to a survey research document. Over a three-year period, three district elementary

schools participated in the survey: Sorrel in 2000, Alder in 2001, and Ferngrove in 2002. All parents with children attending each school received the survey in the mail; along with a stamped, self-addressed envelope for easy return. The California Department of Education (CDE) Dataquest website provided demographic data for the three schools.

Several themes emerged from the parent responses to the survey questions. Parents at Alder and Ferngrove--the schools with families in lower socioeconomic brackets--returned fewer surveys, knew less about the district's school choice option, and targeted transportation difficulties as a factor that hindered making a school transfer. Parents at Ferngrove, in particular, reported they chose to remain in their neighborhood school for the reasons of safety and personal contact. These findings are consistent with those reported in school choice literature.

Among Sorrel parents, who enjoy the highest socioeconomic level among the district's elementary schools; the greatest percentage of parents cited school transfer due to wanting their children to attend school with children from a similar socioeconomic background.

School choice literature, and the findings of this survey research, point to possible school resegregation according to family socioeconomic levels. Due to the relationship between a family's cultural capital and student achievement, academic imbalances among the schools constitute a probable effect when parents choose along these lines.

Several suggestions have been advanced to mitigate against school resegregation and to increase equitable access to school choice.

- Programmatic choices, similar to those found in magnet schools, such as language-immersion programs, science and technology focus schools, and arts-emphasis schools, intended to provide consumer options and to draw more diverse groups of families.
- Careful attention to parent communication in oral and written form, and in the parents' native languages. Outreach efforts to contact and listen to all families; including those who choose to transfer their children to other schools.
- Provision of bus transportation for families who are otherwise excluded from participating in school choice transfer.
- School improvement efforts for neighborhood schools to honor family choice to remain for reasons of familiarity, safety, and close personal connections.

Many questions present themselves as potential topics for future school choice research. It would be helpful to study whether or not parents indicate similar or different reasons for transferring their children out of their district schools; via inter-district, charter, or private school enrollment. Additionally, the study of school districts that have implemented strategies resulting in the successful reversal of student exit would be beneficial. The most critical future research will be to examine those schools whose policies and methods have successfully attracted and

maintained the enrollment of students and families from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

APPENDIX A

ANONYMOUS SURVEY REGARDING SCHOOL CHOICE WITHIN LONGVIEW SCHOOL DISTRICT

My name is Sarah Drisko, and I have been a teacher for Longview School District since 1993. It was at that time that the district began to allow families to choose their children's school, regardless of where the family lived. Do you--like me--wonder what effect school choice has had on the various schools? Have schools become more responsive, due to parental choice? Are families happier with their choices? I am conducting this research for a Master of Arts Degree in Education at Humboldt State University.

This is an anonymous survey. Your individual responses will not be seen by anyone at the district level, by your child's principal or teacher. Responses quoted in a later publication will not contain any details which would allow you or your family to be identified. Please use the enclosed envelope to return your completed survey by May 31.

1. Are you aware that Longview School District allows families to choose the school their children will attend?

- yes
- no

2. What elementary schools have your children attended within Longview?

- Alder
- Redwood
- Ferngrove
- Woodway
- Trillium
- Lupin
- Oceanview
- Sorrel
- Others? Please write them in.

3. If you wanted to change your children to a different school, are you able transport them?

- yes
- no

4. Did you ever change your children's school (without moving to a new home)?

- yes
- no

5. Which school(s) did you choose to leave?

- | | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Alder | <input type="checkbox"/> Trillium |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lupin | <input type="checkbox"/> Redwood |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ferngrove | <input type="checkbox"/> Sorrel |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Woodway | <input type="checkbox"/> Oceanview |

Please comment on the following:

6. Why did you change your children's school? Please specify (academics, neighborhood, teachers, special curriculum, friends, reputation of the school, school calendar and/or hours, proximity to home or child care, homework, and any other reasons.)

7. Did you tell your former school (principal and/or teachers) before you moved to another school? What did you discuss?

8. How did you feel about your new school?

9. Is there anything else you'd like to say about school choice within the Longview School District?

The following questions are for analysis purposes:

10. What is your present job title/position? _____

11. What is your age? _____

12. Racial/Ethnic background? _____

13. How many children do you have? _____

THANK YOU FOR FILLING OUT THIS SURVEY, PLACING IT IN THE ATTACHED ENVELOPE, AND RETURNING IT BY MAY 31, 2002. Sarah Drisko, 449 Essex Lane, Arcata, CA 95521.

REFERENCES

- ACLU Applauds Appeals Court Decision Striking Down Florida School Voucher, Program.* (2004, August 16). Retrieved August 17, 2006, from <http://www.aclu.org/vouchers>
- Apple, M. W. (2001). Comparing neo-liberal projects and inequality in education. *Comparative Education, 37, No 4*, 409-423.
- Archbald, D. (1996). SES and demographic predictors of magnet school enrollment. *Journal of Research and Development in Education, 29, 3*, 152-162.
- Bogdan, R. & Biklen, S. (1998). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Brouillette, L. (2002). *Charter schools: Lessons in school reform*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- California Department of Education. Intra-district open enrollment. Retrieved July 27, 2006, from <http://www.cde.ca.gov>. U.S. Department of Education: <http://www.ed.gov>
- California Education Code. (1993). Chapter 161, Statutes of 1993, Section 35160.5(c).
- Chubb, J., & Moe, T. (1990). *Politics, markets, and America's schools*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.
- Cookson, P. W., Jr. (1994). *School choice: The struggle for the soul of American education*. New Haven, CT: Yale University.

- Cookson, P. W., Jr., & Berger, K. (2002). *Expect miracles: Charter schools and the politics of hope and despair*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Christensen, L., & Karp, S. (2003). *Rethinking school reform: Views from the classroom*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Rethinking Schools, Ltd.
- Doran, B. (2001). Teaching Alice's kids. *North Coast Journal*, XII (2), 7-9.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. (1935). Does the Negro need separate schools? *Journal of Negro Education* 4, 335.
- Fuller, B. (2000). *Inside charter schools: The paradox of radical decentralization*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Fuller, B., & Elmore, R.F. (1996). *Who chooses? Who loses? Culture, institutions, and the unequal effects of school choice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Fusarelli, L. D. (2003). *The political dynamics of school choice: Negotiating contested terrain*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Gardner, David P., Larsen, Yvonne W., Baker, William O., Campbell, Anne, Crosby, Emerald, A., Foster Jr., Charles A., et al. The National Commission of Excellence in Education. (1983). A nation at risk: the imperative for educational reform. Retrieved May 5, 2004, from www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html
- Gewirtz, S., Ball, S., & Bowe, R. (1995). *Markets, choice, and equity in education*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Goldring, E., & Smrekar, C. (2002). Magnet schools: Reform and race in urban education. *The Clearing House*, 76, 1, 13-15.

- Hsieh, C., & Shen, J. Is school choice a mechanism for sustaining change? *The Clearing House*, 75, 2, 88-92.
- Lauder, H., Hughes, D., & Watson, S. (1999). *Trading in futures: Why markets in education don't work*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Levin, H. M. (1998). Educational vouchers: Effectiveness, choice, and costs. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 17, 3, 373-392.
- Marshak, D. (2003). No child left behind: A foolish race into the past. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 85, 3, 229-231.
- Martinez, V. J., Godwin, R. K., Kemerer, F. R., & Perna, L. (1995). The consequences of school choice: Who leaves and who stays in the inner city. *Social Science Quarterly*, 76, 3, 485-501.
- Molnar, Alex. (1999). Educational vouchers: A review of the research. *Center for Education Research, Analysis, and Innovation*, 99-21, 3. Retrieved July 27, 2006, from <http://www.asu.edu/educ/epsl/EPRU/documents/EdVouchers/educationalvouchers.html>
- Neil, A. S. (1960). *Summerhill: A radical approach to child rearing*. New York: Hart Publishing Company.
- Ogawa, R. T., & Dutton, J. S. (1997). Parent involvement and school choice. *Urban Education*, 32, 3, 333-353.
- O'Neil, J. (2004). 50 years of progress--and struggle. *NEA Today*, 22, 8, 22-23.
- Policy Analysis for California Education, (1999). *School choice: Abundant hopes, scarce evidence of results*. Berkeley, California: University of California.

- Raywid, M.A. (1985). Family choice arrangements in public schools: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 55, 4, 435-467.
- Rofes, E., & Stulberg, L. M. (2004). *The emancipatory promise of charter schools: Toward a progressive politics of school choice*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.
- School choice in America: The great debate. (2001, June). *Phi Delta Kappa International*. 13-16.
- Smrekar, C. & Goldring, E. (1999). *School choice in America: Magnet schools and the pursuit of equity*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Tempes, F. (2001, September/October). Holding the state accountable. *Leadership*, 24-26.
- Tyack, D., and Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward Utopia: A century of public school reform*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2001). *Elementary and secondary education act, no child left behind*. (PL 107-110). Sections 5101-5121.
- U. S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. (2001-2002). *Public elementary/secondary school universe survey*".
- U.S. Supreme Court (1954). *Brown v. Board of Education*. (347 U. S. 483 USSC).
- Weaver, R. (2004). Beginning with Brown. *NEA Today*, 22, 8, 5.
- Wells, A. S. (1993). *Time to choose: America at the crossroads of school choice Policy*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Westley, Steve. (2005). *Moreno Valley Unified School District audit report intra-district attendance program*. Retrieved July 20, 2006, from <http://www.sco.ca.gov/aud/mandCostsRpts/fy0506/morenoValleyUSDintra-district.pdf>

Whitty, G., Power, S., & Halpin, D. (1998). *Devolution & choice in education: The school, the state and the market*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.