

Parents' Reasons for Choosing to Enroll their Child in Private High School

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe parents' reasons for choosing a competitive, private high school (National Association of Independent School (NAIS) member school), over available free, public options. Independent schools have long held a strong presence in the nation's educational landscape. However, as more families consider how they will pay for college, independent schools are facing new realities and challenges. This study expands upon previous research, which predominantly focused on school choice, by examining a less studied sample—the private school parents. What are parents' reasons for choosing to send their child or children to a NAIS member high school over free, public-school options?

The study used a qualitative case study approach because it focused on NAIS high schools and parents of students in grades 9-12 from New York City. I conducted semi-structured, individual interviews with a dozen parents of students at the high school division of several NAIS member schools that serve grades K-12.

The research results encompassed three overarching themes that emerged from the interviews: (1) Affordability, (2) Perceived Value, and (3) the Private School Effect/Advantage. In addition, several sub-themes were identified: (1) parents' pro-public-school attitude, (2) the perceived failings of the public school system, (3) the challenges of private schools, and, ultimately, identifying (4) the best match school based on each child's needs. These themes overlapped and created an intricate and interwoven framework from which to answer the research question.

From my findings I concluded that even parents who choose to pay for a private high school for their children voice concerns, complaints, and share a longing for more public virtues.

The main disparity between private and public options is the absence of socio-economic diversity.

Given the qualitative nature of this study, some limitations include that the sample may not generalize to other schools. In addition, the sample is also limited to parents of students currently in high school so may not generalize to other generational/age groups. The sample may also not generalize to schools outside of New York City.

One recommendation for practice is for independent schools to expand focus on life-long learning in the form of adaptability for future careers (many may not even exist yet given how fast technology changes compared with what most parents experienced in their own lifetime) and on living a purposeful and meaningful life. This can be accomplished by shifting attention away from the college list, standardized testing, and grades as a measure of student success, and towards creating innovative programs that help high school students apply their knowledge across disciplines, especially in areas of technology and science, along with the arts and humanities. One recommendation for future research is to examine if and how public schools can replicate what parents seek in private schools.

Keywords for this study include school choice, school choice options, history of school choice, market theory in education, consumerism in education, private schools, private school advantage, Millennials as parents, value of private school education, parent decision making.

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Dedications

I dedicate this dissertation to my son, Oliver, who has spent half his lifetime with me on this pursuit. I will always remember his pep talks, especially during exam times (mom—don't just pass, get A's!), and his sincere belief and pride in me. And, to my partner, Robert, for his unwavering support and love through it all. Lastly, to Charlie, for always dispensing unconditional love and empathy, even on days when I forget to rub her belly.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Independent, private high schools are perceived by some parents as the standard bearer for college preparation, hence the moniker, college preparatory schools. Naomi and Peter (2002) noted that studies indicate private schools offer smaller average class sizes, lower student-teacher ratio, more satisfied teachers, higher scores on standardized testing, more demanding graduation requirements, and produce a larger number of graduates who obtain a college degree by their mid 20s compared to traditional public schools. However, as independent school tuition rises and college costs and student debt reach new heights, it's important to examine parents' perception of the value of an independent school education with regard to their free public counterparts. With more high school options than ever before, most of which are public and free, the future of independent schools warrants a deeper study to examine their ability to remain relevant and innovative in the educational landscape, and capability to be fiscally sound in a crowded marketplace.

Finn (2013) explained that the number of independent schools closing is on the rise. With the exception of the very elite institutions, economically surviving into the future is beyond a simple enrollment and tuition dollar equation, but one where systems and cost structures need to be revamped.

School Choice

School choice proponents hold that choice is the solution to many of the challenges that public schools face. The concept of choice is very much rooted in market theory and politics. For example, The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, created by Nobel Prize winning economist Milton Friedman and his economist wife, Rose, promotes school choice based on the

principle that a healthy free market society should not withhold choice in the school sector. Forster (2016) emphasizes that choice is required to hold public schools accountable and provides client empowerment, which is critical to holding schools accountable for student performance and success. Choice allows parents and students to choose between their zoned public schools, charter and magnet schools, as well as to use vouchers to attend private schools.

Choice proponents recognize the level of preparation private school students receive and highlight that vouchers are a great way for students, especially those who are marginalized, to have access to better school options. School choice advocates note that putting choice in individual family's control empowers all students from all backgrounds. Henig (1994) dives deeply into what it actually takes to make school choice work, noting that some of the much-touted benefits of choice may be incorrectly attributed.

Choice is much more complicated than some proponents make it sound. Choice requires political clout and constant financial commitment. Molnar (2003) in his research outlines the consumerism elements of those who utilize school choice, and the commercial nature of those who offer it. Molnar (1996) noted the corporate sponsors that are popping up on school campuses in the form of products that are exposed to unwitting students; everything from Campbell Soup labels to product placement on campuses. Molnar (1996) provided the example from Wisconsin, which was the first state to allow public vouchers to be used to pay for private school tuition. Although the reason given to support vouchers in Wisconsin was that racial minority and low-income students would benefit greatly from the voucher system, the reality further perpetuates separate but not equal in schools. The true beneficiaries of vouchers are the middle/upper class families (Molnar, 1996). With so many conflicting factors at play in today's landscape for choice, it's not clear if and how students benefit from exercising school choice.

In 2017 Gallup published a study titled, *NAIS-Gallup Report on NAIS Graduates*, which provides another perspective to the school choice debate. Rather than use metrics that were easy to access such as standardized test scores and income and employment rates, the Gallup study focused on graduates of National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) member schools (approximately 1,500) who completed college, and evaluated the graduates in the areas of:

- Purpose Well-Being: Liking what you do each day and being motivated to achieve your goals
- Social Well-Being: Having strong and supportive relationships and love in your life
- Financial Well-Being: Managing your economic life to reduce stress and increase security
- Community Well-Being: Liking where you live, feeling safe and having pride in your community
- Physical Well-Being: Having good health and enough energy to get things done daily

In each area, the study examined whether the NAIS school graduates were either thriving, struggling, or suffering.

- Thriving: Well-Being that is strong and consistent in a particular element
- Struggling: Well-being that is moderate or inconsistent in a particular element
- Suffering: Well-being that is low and inconsistent in a particular element

Ultimately, the Gallup measures looked at a life well-lived and the ultimate result was resounding. “NAIS graduates, including first-generation and minority graduates, outpace their peers who graduated from public and non-NAIS private high schools in seeking out many key experiential learning extracurricular opportunities in college.” (Gallup, 2017, p. 10).

In contrast to these findings, Lubienski and Lubienski (2014) found that public schools hold more value than private. Although their research was confined to K-8, their findings are worth noting. Overall, the authors found that research and data pertaining to public versus private school education commenced in the 1980s, with substantial studies that continue to impact current policies related to school choice and vouchers. They note that while in many studies, private schools tend to yield more student success, it is questionable how public schools are truly being measured.

Some studies that suggest higher academic achievement on standardized tests for students in private schools do not control for socio-economic factors known to influence achievement. Historically, the Equality of Educational Opportunity Report published in 1966, better known as The Coleman Report, was one of the first findings that demonstrated that students from all backgrounds tended to do better at private schools for a variety of reasons, which led to what's known as the "private school effect." At that time, Brown vs. Board of Education was a major case in the making, and policy makers from all directions (be it seeking opportunities for underserved students and trying to achieve more diversity or trying to bypass integration) were quick to use Coleman's study to promote school choice, which ultimately led to the advent of vouchers.

Chubb and Moe (1990) conducted research that focused on the pathologies rooted in the bureaucracy of public-school administration (Lubienski & Lubienski, p. 50). Their findings fueled the argument for charter schools. According to Lubienski and Lubienski, these studies are at the root of many school choice policies, all predicated on the private school effect. Yet, these studies are quite dated and need to be reevaluated. By not using only a single methodological approach or one data set, Lubienski and Lubienski examined various data sets, which allowed

them to present a reinterpretation of the private school effect. To be specific, on a national scale, private schools are not necessarily outperforming public schools, and the data Lubienski and Lubienski gathered indicate the opposite, highlighting that many of the policies and reforms being dictated by market theory are flawed at best and need to be questioned.

In light of the *NAIS-Gallup Report on NAIS Graduates*, NAIS also has research findings indicating the precarious state of independent schools in our current times. In order for independent schools to survive the twenty-first century and beyond, much needs to be done and done differently.

Statement of the Problem

There are over four thousand colleges and universities in the US with over half of those being four-year institutions. Within the group of four-year institutions there are the highly selective colleges and universities most notably listed at the top of *US News and World Reports* rankings. Americans are hyper-aware of the competition to get into college, the mounting costs associated with earning a college degree, and the critical need to be prepared for the competition as noted by Bound, Hershbein, and Terry (2009). Too often, college is the tail that wags the dog in high schools. Being prepared for college has taken on a life beyond academics. It's become an arms race of who can go above and beyond everyone else as per David Coleman, president of the College Board (2019).

NAIS studies indicate that by 2024 the majority of parents with school-age children in the nation will be Millennials, a group closely tracked by market researchers. The exact ages of Millennials vary slightly amongst researchers, but generally they are defined as those born between 1980 and 1996, as per Gallup Inc. Demographically, Millennials widely represent the diversity in our nation, yet they are often misunderstood. Frequently Millennials are portrayed as

a generation that is financially dependent on their parents, as numerous surveys indicate (Young Money Survey, 2019). However, Millennials are also rapidly becoming the new sandwich generation.

In 1981, a social worker named Dorothy Parker created the term “sandwich generation” chiefly to describe women in their 30s-40s caring for aging parents and young children. In wider usage, the sandwich generation has largely been defined by Baby Boomers caring for their elderly parents and children living at home. In 2015, the average sandwich generation caregiver was a 49-year-old white woman caring for her 69-year-old white mother (AARP Public Policy Institute Analysis of Caregiving in the U.S. 2015). However, as the demographics rapidly change, Millennials have come into the spotlight as not only the new sandwich generation, but one that represents new depths in diversity as caregivers: more hold paying jobs, minorities make up the majority, younger people are also caring for grandparents and not just parents, 40% are now men, and forgoing higher education and marrying later are related trends (Flinn, 2018). In addition, the nation’s mounting student loans impact 1 in 5 adults aged 30-44, and 1 in 3 between ages 18 and 29, adding another dimension to the financial sandwich experienced by Millennials (Cilluffo, 2019).

As Millennials make up the majority of parents with school age children by 2024, fiscal obligations pertaining to their own children represent yet another layer of the sandwich that could impede their ability to access private schooling options, never mind trying to save for retirement. Little qualitative research exists, from the point of view of parents, that describes the reasons they choose to send their child/children to selective private high schools at a monetary cost over available free, public-school options.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose for this qualitative case study is to describe parents' reasons for choosing a competitive, private high school (NAIS member school), over an available free public option. Independent schools have long held a strong presence in the nation's educational landscape. According to the most recent 2020 numbers published by the Council for American Private Education, private schools made up 25% of all schools in America in 2016. Secular schools accounted for approximately 22% of that grouping. In addition, NAIS members accounted for 4.8% of all schools in the U.S. By comparison, in 2016 NAIS had 1,672 member institutions versus 1,233 in the 2020-2021 school year, indicating a 25% decrease. The culture of independent schools is based on mission and the mindset that if you build it, they'll come. However, as more families consider how they will pay for college, independent schools are facing new realities and challenges.

Significance of the Study

This study expands previous research on the topic by examining a less studied sample, the private school parents. Examining parental reasons for choosing a selective private school would add to the literature on what aspects of a private school education appeal to parents. In the debate of which is better, public versus private school, many studies in support of one or the other exist. However, comparing results may not be consistent in that they are using different metrics in determining value. This study provides insights from the point of view of the parent as to why they choose to pay for a high school education rather than choose a free option in light of the mounting financial challenges facing American families. With Millennial, a.k.a. the new sandwich generation, on the cusp of becoming the majority demographic of private school parents, a deeper understanding of how parents choose private over public high school is critical.

Research Question

What are parents' reasons for choosing to send their child/children to a NAIS member high school over free, public-school options?

Overview of Methods

The study uses a qualitative case study approach because it focuses on NAIS high schools and parents of students in grades 9-12 from New York City. To carry out the study, I interviewed a variety of parents who have recently made a high school choice for their student. I conducted semi-structured, individual interviews with a dozen parents of students at the high school division of several selective schools that serve grades K-12 in New York City. The sample included two criteria: (1) parents who made a choice to send their child to an NAIS independent school over the available public option, and (2) each parent participant, at the time of the study, had at least one child enrolled at the independent high school of choice so that the choice they made for their child was relatively recent.

To facilitate coding the data collected, interviews were recorded. Qualitative content analysis with inductive category application was used. Through coding the data discernible themes were identified.

Limitations of the Study

Given the qualitative nature of this study, some limitations include that the sample may not generalize to other schools. In addition, the sample is also limited to parents of students currently in high school so may not generalize to other generational/age groups. The sample may also not generalize to schools outside of New York City.

Delimitations of the Study

This study was created to better understand how parents choose private over public high school options for their child. As the current director of college guidance at a New York City NAIS member school and having served in the same role at another NAIS member school in New York City, one delimitation of this study is that I may work with some of the participants in their children's college process. As such, I prioritized selecting parents I did not know for this study and making clear that this research is unrelated to the work I do at my place of employment. Additional delimitations of this study include: (1) the subjects were all related to NAIS member schools, (2) only parents were interviewed, (3) only parents of current high school students were included, and (4) the results were obtained from a densely populated urban center that has a high market saturation of private schools. As such, results may not generalize beyond this context.

Definitions of Terms and Abbreviations

The following are definitions of terms and abbreviations relevant to the study.

NAIS: National Association of Independent Schools

Private School: NAIS Members

Public School: Inclusive of Charters, Magnets, and traditional public schools

School Choice: Allows for parents to choose for their children between their zoned public schools, charter and magnet schools, as well as to use vouchers to attend private schools.

Sustainability: Private school's ability to be fiscally sound and thriving

Viability: Private school's ability to remain relevant and innovative in the educational landscape

Vouchers: A form of education funding redirected from public schools to individual families to use on school choice—specifically, non-public alternatives to traditional public schools.

This chapter outlined the proposed study and research question, including the statement of the problem, the purpose and significance of the study, overview of study methods, limitations and delimitations, and definition of terms and abbreviations. Chapter 2 will cover the literature researched for the study with specific focus on school choice.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction to the Review

School choice is a concept that educators and parents come across frequently. Yet, its history and evolution are nuanced and political. When the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* case concluded that separate was not equal and segregation must end in American schools, there was no directive on how to do that. Friedman posited that a healthy free market society should not withhold choice in the school sector. Forster (2016) emphasized that choice is required to hold public schools accountable and provide client empowerment, which is critical to accounting for student performance and success in public schools.

In 1966, a dozen years after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling, Coleman's historically significant *Equality of Educational Opportunity Report*, better known as the Coleman Report, concluded through their studies that students from all backgrounds tended to do better at private schools for a variety of reasons, which led to what's known as the "private school effect." Policy makers representing a variety of political and economic positions were quick to use Coleman's study to promote school choice, which ultimately led to the advent of vouchers, whether it was to seek opportunities for underserved students and trying to achieve more diversity or trying to bypass integration.

Supporters of choice claim that choice allows for students to choose between their zoned public schools, charter and magnet schools, as well as to use vouchers to attend private schools--essentially, choice empowers all students from all backgrounds. However, choice requires political clout and constant financial commitment. Molnar (2003) outlined the consumerism elements of those who utilize school choice, and the commercial nature of those who offer it. In

addition, Henig (1994) highlighted the need for constant financial investment to make choice work. Chubb and Moe (1990) conducted research that focused on the pathologies rooted in the bureaucracy of public-school administration (Lubienski & Lubienski, p. 50). Their findings fueled the argument for charter schools.

Lubienski and Lubienski (2013) raised the concern that the root of many school choice policies is predicated on the private school effect. Lubienski and Lubienski's own research allowed them to present a reinterpretation of the private school effect which found that on a national scale, private schools are not necessarily outperforming public schools, and that many of the policies and reforms being dictated by market theory are flawed at best and need to be questioned. In addition, Pianta and Ansari (2018) concluded from their research that when controlling for socioeconomic characteristics in students and families, the advantages of a private school education are eliminated.

With so many conflicting factors at play in the school choice landscape it's not clear if or how students benefit from exercising school choice. Nonetheless, it's clear that market theory and politics are at the root of school choice. Yet, little qualitative research exists, from the point of view of parents, regarding the reasons they choose to send their child/children to competitive private high schools at a substantial monetary cost over available free public options. This study examines parental reasons for choosing to send their child/children to a private, competitive high school over public options. In this chapter, we will review the following: school choice through its history, practice and challenges; parent perceptions of choice with a focus on millennial parents and how parents as a whole make school choices; and private schools through their mission, value, and their future.

Existing Reviews and Their Significance

There exists a variety of literature on the topic of school choice. One robust category focuses on the historical and/or theoretical elements of school choice. This ranges from what choice meant prior to the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* case in 1954, to its evolution since that time (Logan, 2018). Choice is often based on the free-market notion that private school vouchers can be a win-win for public schools and all students by allowing families to choose a private education that is paid for by vouchers. The perception that private schools are the gold standard for education is rooted in Coleman's 1966 study that has been dubbed *the private school effect*.

Little existing literature challenges the private school effect, hence, Lubienski and Lubienski's pivotal research published in 2013 has been significant in demanding more careful comparisons and better use of current data to delve deeper into substantive correlation between public and private school education. Baker (2009) shared that a lot of the choice jargon used in the public vs. private comparisons are akin to apples and oranges and is often accepted without question. Yet, policies based on such a grave oversight impact millions of American children. For example, it's inaccurate to compare public school per pupil spending vs. private school tuition when the actual cost of a private education is often much higher than tuition. In addition, Baker highlights the importance of identifying the different categories of schools within the private grouping--Catholic, other parochial, and secular. He notes that when comparing national averages for public school spending vs. private school tuition, the numbers are disingenuous. Public spending appears to be comparable to or even more than Catholic and conservative Christian schools, but often they are far below other religious and independent schools as a whole. In other words, the arguments made for choice and vouchers may disproportionately

channel students to Catholic and conservative Christian schools and not other religious or independent schools.

Altenhofen et al. (2016) examined how high-income parents in the suburbs of Denver made charter school choices, highlighting that for white families of means, factors such as reputation and reliable social networks may play a more important role in their choice than actual school quality. However, much of the existing literature around choice leaves out parental reasons for choosing independent schools over public options.

For private school leaders, the school choice debate's perpetuation of inaccurate measures for the actual cost of public vs. private school education further complicates their goal to attract more applicants. Hardly does an independent school tuition represent the much higher cost of a student's actual education beyond tuition dollars, and actual cost alone only scrapes at the true value of an independent school education. Therefore, existing literature is lacking in its offerings towards what is most needed by independent school leaders--what parents perceive to be of value in a private school education.

Focus of Current Review

The focus of this review is to drill deeper into the concept of choice from the perspective of parents seeking options in the independent school landscape. With the plentiful scholarly articles on the history and evolution of school choice, there has been scant focus on comparisons between independent schools versus public school alternatives in terms of how parents choose private over public. From the school choice angle, a lot of focus has been on its theory, the politics involved, the resulting policies, and the flaws of school choice. However, not much literature has been produced with regard to parental choice in the secular, selective independent school realm.

In the popular school choice debate, the cacophony of opposing voices all too often mutes more nuanced areas worthy of further examination. For example, while much research has been done on Millennials to target their spending power, there does not exist much research on how they choose to spend money on their children's education. It's unclear how school choice impacts parents, including Millennial parents, who, by 2024, will be the majority parent group of school age children. Further, there is limited research on how parents in urban settings are impacted by school choice and how they choose private over public schools for their children. And, as parents who are looking to choose the right school for their children weigh whether to pay for an experience that can be had for free via the public school system, there is little literature examining the value of a public-school education beyond the fact that it is "free" versus the actual cost of a private school education beyond its published tuition. In fact, mismatched data that compares per pupil expenditure in the public system vs. tuition rather than actual cost per student in private school settings is a prime example. It is critical to dig deeper into useful comparisons that can help parents better define what is valuable in any school setting, especially in a private school that is at an additional cost to parents.

Review Methods

With reference to scholarly journals, I used the Sage journal database through the Seton Hall University library site. For more updated and specific research directly related to independent schools, I used research and information published by the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) and other related professional organizations and interest groups. In addition, magazines and newspaper articles added current context. Key words/phrases for my review were: school choice, school choice options, history of school choice, market theory in

education, consumerism in education, private schools, private school advantage, Millennials as parents, value of private school education, parent decision making.

Limitations of the Review

There were various limitations to this review. Generally, the review was limited to the chosen databases, date ranges, and periodicals. Given that there is limited literature on the specific topic of how parents choose an independent school over their public options, and that the notion of value is also at play, the review could not consist of only scholarly articles. In addition to scholarly journals, timely and relevant information was obtained through other sources.

Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion of Literature

The criteria for inclusion of literature were as follows:

- Qualitative and mixed methods studies
- Peer reviewed studies from 1995 to the present
- Landmark legislative cases
- Relevant books
- Reports from professional associations and private entities
- Articles and literature from professional organizations and interest groups
- Periodical articles used for context

Methodological Issues with Existing Literature

There are various limitations with the existing literature. First, the literature about school choice is associated with free-market and consumerism theory. Little emphasis has been placed on actual factors that drive parent decision making with regard to school choice. Although surveys and reports from interest groups lend to related research, it's important to note that they can be biased. Further, the assumptive use of the private school effect to drive school choice can be

misleading because it lacks empirical evidence of how private schools perform better than public schools. Many studies confuse the comparisons, and their results are not accurate. Take for example the comparison between per pupil expenditure in public schools versus tuition cost at a private school--the two are not comparable measures. Instead, per pupil expenditure at a private school is often more than the published tuition and does not take into account donations and fundraising. In addition, most references to private schools do not clearly define the different types of private schools, which is critical in understanding their funding and being able to make better comparisons both within the private school category as well as with public schools. For example, religious schools often receive funding from religious entities, e.g., Catholic schools, while non-profit independent and non-religious schools often have higher price tags than religious schools and require far more private fundraising to sustain their existence. Existing literature makes it challenging to unpack whether or not the private school effect truly exists--even important works that challenge the private school effect are confined to findings based on a limited K-8 population.

School Choice Through its History, Practice, and Challenges

Overview of Choice

Logan (2018) presented a historical and political overview of the modern school choice movement. This bird's eye view breaks school choice into several categories: historic, 1950s, Civil Rights era, post-Civil Rights era, the 1980s, 1990s, and into the 21st century. Historically, private schools were reserved for families who could afford to pay the tuition and choice was based on educational philosophy, geography, and religious affiliation. These private schools existed at a time when the nation created common schools, or the precursors to public schools. The first alternative to public schools were privately funded Catholic schools.

School choice as we know it today largely has roots in the 1950s when free market economist Milton Friedman championed the modern school choice movement espousing that school choice maximizes student performance and school accountability and minimizes government involvement in schools. During the Civil Rights Movement, liberals viewed school choice as a means of creating educational opportunity for poor, particularly black, children which led to the creation of the Mississippi Freedom Schools--examples of the earliest form of charter schools. In the post-Civil Rights 1970s, specialized or alternative public schools, known today as magnet schools, were created to further racial integration. By the 1980s, many felt the US was falling behind its competitors in the areas of commerce, industry, science, and technology, which led to the 1983 National Commission on Excellence in Education's report--better known as *A Nation at Risk*. As a result, the push for school choice continued and private management of schools led to an increase in charter schools. By the 1990s there was an increase in families that eschewed having their children's education dictated by systems of bureaucracy and re-established family as the center of education through homeschooling. By the early 21st century, the No Child Left Behind Act and Race to the Top competitive grant program further pushed the public out of traditional public schools by cementing charter schools as part of the establishment rather than the solution to school choice and integration. Logan also pointed out that the oldest, most pervasive, and most inequitable form of school choice is residential choice. Specifically, racially and economically integrated neighborhoods do not necessarily guarantee integrated schools and integrated schools do not guarantee integrated neighborhoods (Saporito, 2003; Saporito & Sohoni, 2007). Logan's contribution to the topic of school choice resides in her observation that six decades after the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling that separate is not

equal, the future of school choice is not much different from its original mission--challenging a system that perpetuates inequality in our schools and nation at large.

Vouchers and Consumerism

Molnar et al., (1996) made clear that school choice serves its architects and *not* minority students. "The publicity and political posturing surrounding the new choice report reveal the extent to which the claim to serve the interests of low-income and minority students--especially African Americans--has been harnessed by neoconservatives to advance their own agenda" (p.242). Choice as demonstrated by the use of vouchers for private schools was first pioneered in Wisconsin. The goal was to better integrate minority and low-income students by giving them a choice of schools to attend. Yet, vouchers actually perpetuate separate but not equal schools and benefit the middle/upper class, which Molnar et al. highlighted as the underlying goal of neo conservatives. Molnar et al.'s contribution to the literature on school choice is critical in bringing to light the association between consumerism and choice, especially in the nascent stage of vouchers.

Molnar (2003) presented further evidence that the consumerism aspect of choice has increased and grown into commercialism in public schools. The data he used further demonstrated that not only all children were negatively impacted by commercialism, but the very group of students for whom school choice was supposed to help the most, ethnic minority and low-income, were the ones that hurt the most. Molnar used Channel One, as a prime example of school-based marketing. Channel One reached 12,000 schools nationally and targeted middle and high school students with numerous advertisements of fast food, soft drinks, and candy. Molnar correlated data from the Center for Disease Control and other sources that demonstrated the rise in childhood obesity and how unhealthy food choices undermined not just the health of

students but their education. This addition to the literature on school choice is pivotal in demonstrating how interconnected school choice has become with not just consumerism, but commercialism, and how even further removed school choice is in serving the population that it claims to prioritize. It's a stark reminder that school choice is not a simple option that can be easily utilized, sustained, or even fully understood. Instead, it is deeply entrenched in politics and the agenda of those who advocate for it, all the while not improving integration in schools or the needs of minorities and black students.

Limits of the Market Metaphor

Henig (1995) utilized various sources of public data to demonstrate his chief argument that tying choice to the market metaphor is dangerously unsophisticated. The only way choice can work is if it is viewed as one of many tools rather than a solution to school reform and integration. In order for choice to work, it requires a complicated web of constant financial commitment, political clout, and dissociation from market theory. There has been very little true success that has come about with choice and much of the success is not correctly attributed. Take for example, magnet schools, which “evolved as an effort by public officials to use government authority and resources to structure a system within which individual choices would promote a social goal: racial integration” (Henig, p.151). Yet, studies indicate that due to the demographics associated with magnet schools, integration is far from a reality while segregation continues to thrive. Henig's work is critical in adding to the body of literature that challenges school choice as we know it. Henig carefully demonstrated the fraught nature of school choice as it is tied to market theory, while also devoting a good portion of his book to recommending how choice can work better as part of a bigger solution to school reform, and not as the sole solution.

The Public School Advantage

Lubienski and Lubienski (2013) found that public schools hold more value than private schools. Although their research was confined to K-8, their findings are worth noting. Overall Lubienski and Lubienski (2013) found that research and data pertaining to public versus private school education commenced in the 1980s, with substantial studies that continue to impact current policies related to school choice and vouchers. They note that while in many studies, private schools tend to yield more student success, it is questionable how public schools are truly being measured--are they being compared to a targeted group of international students who have higher standardized test scores, are they solely being compared to private schools, and why do our policy makers view public schools as failing our students. Historically, Coleman's studies from the 1960s primarily demonstrated that students from all backgrounds tended to do better at private schools for a variety of reasons, which led to what's known as the "private school effect." At that time, *Brown vs. Board of Education* was a major case in the making, and policy makers from all directions (be it seeking opportunities for underserved students and trying to achieve more diversity or trying to bypass integration) were quick to use Coleman's study to promote school choice, which ultimately led to the concept of vouchers.

Chubb and Moe (1990) conducted research that focused on the pathologies rooted in the bureaucracy of public-school administration (Lubienski & Lubienski, p. 50). Their findings fueled the argument for charter schools. According to Lubienski and Lubienski, these studies are at the root of many school choice policies, all predicated on the private school effect. Yet, the studies are quite dated and need to be reevaluated. Lubienski and Lubienski (2013) examined various data sets, which allowed them to present a reinterpretation of the private school effect. To be specific, on a national scale, private schools are not necessarily outperforming public

schools, and the data Lubienski and Lubienski gathered indicate this, highlighting that many of the policies and reforms being dictated by market theory are flawed at best and need to be questioned. (Lubienski & Lubienski, p. 93) This study is revolutionary as one of the first to significantly question the private school effect and debunk the entrenched notion that private schools are inherently better than public schools.

Student Outcomes at Age 15

Pianta and Ansari (2015) followed over 1,000 students in private schools between kindergarten and ninth grade for over fifteen years. Pianta and Ansari (2015) were able to study not only a large, but diverse sample of students over a much longer evaluation period than most studies. Geographic diversity as well as socioeconomic mix were accounted for in the study. In addition, the study was detailed and wide-ranging in the factors examined. Pianta and Ansari drilled down into various factors: (a) child characteristics and experiences during early childhood, (b) race, (c) gender, (d) family characteristics during early childhood, and (e) neighborhood characteristics during early childhood.

Pianta and Ansari critically found evidence that school voucher supporters' claim that private schools provide better student performance outcomes are flawed. The study found that across nearly all areas of examination, children with a history of private school enrollment outperformed their public-school counterparts. However, all the advantages were eliminated when socioeconomic characteristics were controlled for in the study. Ultimately, Pianta and Ansari found no evidence that the achievement gap can be addressed through policies that support widespread enrollment in private schools (Pianta & Ansari, p. 431).

Reconsidering Educational Consumerism

The modern concept of school choice was founded on free market theory. As the nation moved towards the free market approach to education, the government, and many of our policies and practices in a capitalist nation, became market driven. Schwartzman (2016) found that educational consumerism is a source of many problems in our education system, and not at all a solution as per school choice advocates. In fact, he counters that market mentality has no place in education and that “adopting this framework frays the moral fabric of education and shortchanges students by configuring them as consumers to placate rather than characters to build.” Commodifying education has shifted the role of students from learners to consumers and teachers from scholars to customer service specialists. Pedagogy has been replaced by customer satisfaction and intellectual stimulation and discourse have been replaced by what is more comfortably attained through rote learning, busy work, and anticipated outcomes chiefly via grades and test scores. Students as consumers simply want to obtain a degree to certify that they are qualified to work.

Schwartzman’s contribution to the literature on school choice is critical in warning that the value of education cannot be sufficiently expressed via the marketplace. In fact, “subjecting a public good like education to commercial logic is generally disastrous” (McChesney, 2013, p.52). While the study was focused on higher education, it is directly applicable to the challenges of school choice.

School Choice from the Parents’ Perspective

Parent Perception of School Choice

How school choice is actually exercised and how it benefits those who engage in school choice are the subjects of some studies. However, examining the role that neighborhood and

school contexts play in shaping schooling enrollment outcomes has largely been unaddressed (Lauen, p.181).

Lauen (2018) added to the literature by approaching the topic from the lesser considered angle of neighborhood and school context. To carry out the research, Lauen used geocoded population-level confidential administrative data on children in the Chicago Public Schools and census data, focusing on the cohort who were eighth graders in the spring of 2001. Adjustments to the data were made for relevancy and controls were added to avoid biasing the contextual effects. Lauen was able to use the data from 60% of eighth graders, living in 84% of the census tracts and attending 91% of the public elementary schools in Chicago during spring of 2000 (Lauen, p. 184)

Key findings included: (a) choice is more likely exercised by higher income and educated parents in wealthier neighborhoods (b) students in high performing neighborhood schools tend not to exercise choice, and (c) students in low performing neighborhood schools generally stay in assigned schools rather than choose other school options. The findings further the existing choice disparity literature in demonstrating that racial, ethnic, and class disparities impact school choice.

Examining school choice from the parent decision making lens is an understudied area. Altenhofen, Berends, and White, (2016) explored whether assumptions derived from market theory were empirically grounded, especially among charter schools in suburban, high-income areas (Altenhofen, et al., p. 1). Altenhofen et al. (2016) surveyed 553 parents, 63% of the initial sample of lottery applicants, from the six Core Knowledge (K-8) charter schools in Colorado, in 2010 to understand how parents from a wealthy, suburban area of Denver became interested in charter schools, the most important reasons why parents choose charter schools, and what information sources these parents used when applying to charter schools. The survey used both

open and closed-ended questions to determine if and how academic quality, social networks, safety and discipline, distance between home and school, and racial/ethnic composition of school played a role in parents choosing a charter school. The surveys were conducted over a four-month period. Some of the challenges of this study were that it only used one cohort and that the survey was administered approximately 2.5 years after parents had already made a school choice. Nonetheless, its findings lend to the existing literature a more nuanced perspective to observe school choice.

The survey results indicated that predictable measures such as good teachers, social networks, reputation for academic quality, and child's safety were the most common reasons why parents choose charter schools. The authors also found some inconsistencies from previous studies. Factors including distance from home, services for special needs, and test scores were far lower on the list of importance to parents. Lareau (2014) also found that academic quality means different things to different parents.

Millennial Parents and School Choice

The School Choice Survey Research results were published on January 28, 2016 as a memorandum for The American Federation for Children, a national, educational choice advocacy group. The special interest project was conducted by Beck Research LLC, which designs and conducts qualitative and quantitative research related to voters, based in Washington, D.C. The purpose of the study was to compare 2016 study results with the same study conducted in 2015. The national survey was conducted during January 2016, with people who were likely voters in the 2016 Presidential election. The people surveyed were live callers on landlines and cell phones. The initial sample size was 800, which was then increased by an additional 200 Latino voters and another 100 Millennials, with a total sample size of 1,100 people. The base sample margin of error was +/- 3.5%.

While there are a lot of studies pertaining to many different aspects of school choice, this particular study, as per its research question, was trying to prove that school choice was supported by a wide swath of people in all different subcategories, e.g., political party, gender, ethnicity, etc. Although the sample size may be limited in that it may not necessarily represent the population makeup of the nation, the researchers adjusted for this limitation by adding additional Latino and Millennial samples. However, it excludes Asians and bi/multi-racial or “others”, and only includes Whites, Latinos, and African-Americans, which represents a major limitation.

Although the premise of school choice had its roots in helping students in low performing schools or underserved populations, its popularity also indicates that it’s a common option for many who may not be the original target audience. With that in mind, not accounting for the impact of socio-economic differences in a study makes it difficult to see the impact on the actual population that school choice was meant to serve.

The researchers did make a clear correlation between the would-be-voters and increase support for school choice. In particular, the two groups that stood out the most in terms of preference for and support of school choice were Latinos (76%) and Millennials (75%). However, it is important to note that for the purposes of The American Federation for Children, a strong correlation is critical for their cause, and this independent study they executed is part of their strategy. The findings continue to fuel the argument for school choice, which is gaining popularity for most adults (many Millennials) with school age children.

Private Schools—Mission, Value, and Future

Market Shift

Cooper (2017) highlights a mindset shift needed in independent schools to innovate and change to meet the new demands of a new generation of parents—Millennials. This article was impactful as it explained how Cooper disrupted the tried-and-true, business as usual approach to independent school advancement and governance at his school.

The crux of Cooper’s message was this: As the price of tuition continues to outpace inflation, and more school choices are available to families, independent schools need to move away from the, “if we build it and retain it, they will come” model. The price of tuition justifies the perception that independent schools are a luxury. And, as such, there has been significant research done on marketing luxury products to Millennials. While many educators may balk at the concept that education is a product, no less a luxury product, Cooper’s analogy is apropos. While you can’t upend decades, even centuries, of school culture and tradition, it’s time to revamp school marketing efforts to focus on market demands.

The single most important innovation Cooper had put in place was routine family surveys. Cooper was careful to point out that these surveys were not just about how students were doing in the school community, but, just as important, how parents were experiencing the same community. Surveying was a tool that was embraced at his school, which required a culture that believes in, values, and acts on the feedback. Cooper stated, “[We] sought to proactively address the small deficiencies or miscommunications that, left unchecked, can lead to attrition or a feeling of dissatisfaction that drives parents to seek different options.”

Cooper highlighted the innovation he implemented at his school, and the positive results yielded over the last several years. Because the message shared is based on Millennial behavioral

preferences and the general need to work with and better understand them, it is convincing and even inspirational. However, as a concept, what worked at Cooper's school may not necessarily work with such success, or work at all, at other independent schools. Hence, there are many limitations to what Cooper presents. One obvious limitation is that Cooper's experience is based on only one school, studied through the lens of Cooper, not independent researchers. Another limitation is that other school leaders may not agree with this approach, even if the majority of their parent body is composed of Millennials. Another limitation may be that even if a head of school is motivated to implement changes à la Cooper, they may not have support from their community (board, parents, faculty) to do so.

Effects of Tuition Increases on Enrollment Demand

At a time when our society and culture place tremendous value on a college degree, the mounting pressures of affording a college education combined with the many alternatives to independent schools that are more readily available from preschool to high school, independent schools need to rethink where they stand in the educational marketplace. Independent School Management (ISM), Measuring Success, and the National Business Officers Association (NBOA) (2017) found that tuition increases did not have a negative influence on enrollments in independent schools. The 2017 study was a replication of studies done in 2006 and 2011, but with a larger sample and improvements, allowing for a more thorough look at whether independent school tuition increase impacted enrollment. They made improvements such as expanding enrollment outcomes from lagging to leading metrics. They also looked at attrition by key entry grades rather than by total enrollment or division. The 2017 study included 259 schools compared to 140 in the 2011 study. Among other improvements was the use of 46 different regressions versus only 17 in the previous study.

The researchers found no relationships between tuition increases and negative influences on enrollment. They acknowledge that anecdotally this concept seems counterintuitive but are quick to point out that independent schools need to use data, and not anecdotes, when making decisions about raising tuition. They concluded that “Independent schools serve a market niche that does not seem to experience enrollment declines as price increases.” (NBOA, 2017, p.17) Additionally, the value added to this study is its highlighting of what truly matters to both current and perspective families when tuition increases—the study indicated that :

... the distinctive missions of our individual schools and the effective execution of that mission—known as perceived quality, perceived value, or distinct value proposition—are the more important determinants for enrollment stability...If families do not perceive a high-quality education with a strong value proposition, increasing tuition or even keeping it flat or reducing it will still result in dropping enrollment." (NBOA, 2017, p.17)

Ultimately, “It’s the mission and excellent execution of that mission that are the significant enrollment stabilizers.” (NBOA, 2017, p.17) As such, this study’s findings can be critical to the governance and administration of independent schools.

Financially Sustainable Schools

Bassett (2010) expounded on the fact that the new financial normal that was born out of necessity during the Great Recession is here to stay. The key focus of this article was how independent schools need to secure their future with a different approach to budgeting and tuition setting, all predicated on the definition of value being perceived outcomes divided by perceived price. With more public charters, parochial schools, magnet schools, lower tuition at for-profit schools, and even online schools offering competitive college preparatory programs, families have a lot more free/more affordable options than just independent schools.

Taking into consideration that this article was written during the Great Recession of 2008, there are limitations to what transpired in the years thereafter. Certainly, the dire effects of financial disarray and volatility are not as prominent in 2017 as they were in 2010. Nonetheless, those effects have lasting impact, particularly for many Millennials who entered the job force in the depth of the Great Recession. As such, Bassett's findings are, in many ways, as relevant today as they were in 2010.

Bassett draws from NAIS's book *Affordability and Demand*, the Independent School Leadership's *Head to Head* newsletter (November, 2009), as well as other NAIS research for this article. The findings provide important guidance for independent school financial governance. A key takeaway is that more funds should go to endowment as more funds are raised, including from tuition. Budgets should not be entirely based on tuition income and important programs and amenities need a careful reevaluation. The purpose of the school board is not solely financial but needs to be about securing the school's future. In reality, these are not earth-shattering concepts, but, quite frankly, ones that independent schools have not figured out how to manage as a group because increasing tuition (usually at a rate that outpaces the increase in consumer price index/inflation) has been the foundation of the old normal.

Financial sustainability is nothing new, but how Bassett presents it in light of the new normal, in the context of his model, is profound. Once again, a shift in how value is defined is key. This is a reminder to all involved in independent schools that business as usual and tuition driven fiscal models need to be replaced with a values driven approach. Bassett's quote from one of the NAIS trustees succinctly sums it up, "If you are not a school of the future, you may not be a school *with* a future." (NAIS, 2010, p.3)

New School Models

In 2016, NAIS published a New Schools Model study that highlighted competitive alternatives to independent schools as we know them. NAIS as an organization has been proactive with identifying and researching trends, best practices, and forecasting concerns and solutions for its constituents. In this case, over the span of three months, NAIS gathered publicly available information and data on six, new and alternative options to conventional, independent schools. In addition, they also interviewed administrators at each of the schools researched. The study reflects both the data collected as well as information derived from interviews.

For generations, independent schools operated in a culture that believed mission was what drove enrollment. However, the new normal begs revision of how such schools define mission. While this study of new, independent school alternatives is limited to a small sample, and all six are brick and mortar schools and for-profit except for one, it does provide some context for how alternative school options are giving conventional, and some very old, independent schools a run for their money (quite literally). One limitation speaks volumes of these new alternatives—that even NAIS is unclear how to categorize them. After all, NAIS is an organization for all independent schools and by virtue of sampling these six schools they are saying they are alternative to “independent schools”, yet, by definition, they, too, are independent schools. There lies the conundrum of how the competition is different, yet unaware of, how it is similar.

From the study, it's clear that collectively, the schools sampled represent their own version of disruptive enterprise. They all exist in markets they know well and offer what seems to be lacking in the conventional, independent schools in their market. Their tuition ranges from well under the market rate, to slightly, but still significantly, below the average, to about the

same as other schools in the market. Even with such a small sample, what is clear is that these schools seem to have heard what parents are seeking, but not finding elsewhere; global school networks, an emphasis on STEM/STEAM/IT, a clear message that fundraising is not part of the picture (except at Brightworks, which is the only non-profit).

This study has various limitations. However, it makes clear that these sample schools merely represent the tip of the iceberg with regard to a new breed of schools—schools that are disruptive to the enterprise of independent schools.

NAIS-Gallup Report on NAIS Graduates

This 2017 study provided another perspective to the school choice debate by being focused on graduates of NAIS member schools (approximately 1,500) who completed college, and evaluated the graduates in the areas of:

- Purpose Well-Being: Liking what you do each day and being motivated to achieve your goals
- Social Well-Being: Having strong and supportive relationships and love in your life
- Financial Well-Being: Managing your economic life to reduce stress and increase security
- Community Well-Being: Liking where you live, feeling safe and having pride in your community
- Physical Well-Being: Having good health and enough energy to get things done daily

In each area, the study examined if the NAIS graduates were either thriving, struggling, or suffering using the following definitions.

- Thriving: Well-Being that is strong and consistent in a particular element
- Struggling: Well-being that is moderate or inconsistent in a particular element

- Suffering: Well-being that is low and inconsistent in a particular element

Ultimately, the Gallup measures looked at a life well-lived and the ultimate results were positive. “NAIS graduates, including first-generation and minority graduates, outpace their peers who graduated from public and non-NAIS private high schools in seeking out many key experiential learning extracurricular opportunities in college” (Gallup, 2017, p. 10). However, Gallup’s poll did not account for socio-economic status of the students in the various schools, and it only had 233 parents of school aged children in the sample of almost 1,100 people. It is unknown how many participants actually attended both types of schools in order to make an informed response. While there has been push back on the private school effect in the context of school choice, this study was critical to the literature of school choice in parceling out the difference between independent schools, specifically members of NAIS, as a subset of private schools.

Practical Significance

The practical significance of this literature review provides an examination of school choice, highlighting the need for more nuanced studies of choice. From the point of view of independent school administration, the literature that exists on school choice, its history, evolution, policies and politics are critical to understanding the landscape of K-12 education in the US. However, as more recent research points to the gaps in using market and consumerism theory to justify school choice, the concept of the private school effect has come under fire. Works by Lubienski and Lubienski and Pianta and Ansari have begun to unearth critical findings in the K-8 space that indicate the private school effect may simply not exist.

As the demand for higher education takes on new fervor, mounting student loan debt and its larger societal impact have become a paramount national concern. The cost of private school tuition, akin to college tuition, continues to increase at a rate that outpaces inflation. When

looking specifically at independent schools that are NAIS members, they represent the subset of private schools that have the highest tuition as compared to, for example, religious or other private schools. Various studies indicate that independent schools as we know it are due for major overhaul if they want to exist and have a future. Tuition-based operations have proven to be outdated, so has the notion that children will enroll simply because it has a mission. Although change is often elusive in organizations, the need to make a change has been kicking around for a good while—something that even the most prestigious institutions had to contemplate as they weathered the Great Recession and now Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). Independent school enrollment seems to be at a critical moment where a tipping point has been reached, and schools that speak to the concerns and preferences of parents, specifically Millennial parents, seem to be ones free from tradition and history and represent a disruptive force in what once was a steady industry of independent schools. With NAIS membership noticeably decreasing in recent years, independent schools will benefit from knowing what actually drives parents to choose an NAIS member independent school over their public option.

Theoretical Framework

School choice is based in part on free market theory as created by neo-liberal economists, most notably Milton Friedman. Over time, the free-market model has asserted itself as a dominating force in capitalism, and the concept of customer satisfaction being the driving force of efficiency is pervasive even in education. The emphasis on customer satisfaction forms the basis of consumerism theory (sometimes referred to as consumer choice) and is a branch of microeconomics. “Consumer theory is concerned with how a rational consumer would make consumption decisions” (Levin & Milgrom, 2004, p.1).

School choice is an example of consumerism theory at work; take your tuition dollars to where you will be most satisfied. Theoretically, everyone benefits from school choice, and it is marketed as a solution to integrating schools and to ensure student access and success. From its inception, politicians and activists alike have run with the free market concept of school choice (Logan, 2018). Despite documented challenges and inefficiencies in applying consumerism theory to school choice, change and improvement seem elusive. Over the last six decades, policies and politics surrounding consumerism theory in school choice have become not only nuanced but nebulous within both education and government systems (Molnar et al., 1996). In fact, consumerism in school choice has developed into commercialism in our public schools, which further negates its alleged aim to serve all students, especially those who are most marginalized (Molnar, 2003).

There is mounting research that points to the inefficiencies of free market theory in the educational space, and that the commodification of learning has created more inequities than it has purportedly set out to combat. Conceptually, empowering students with school choice gives them more control over their own education and helps schools improve as they respond to the free market changes. However, it takes more than a free market governed by consumerism theory for school reform to take place. School choice alone cannot change our school system for the better, but it can definitely play a significant role in a larger framework of school reform and integration (Henig, 1994). In addition, grooming students to be consumers of education may have resulted in students being minimalist consumers of education rather than critically thinking learners (Schwartzman, 2016). Even elementary students “may reject approaches that emphasize intellectual quality in favor of repetitive, non-challenging and educationally debilitating work

because, although not engaging intellectually, they are able to ‘do’ the task, fill in the worksheet, keep busy and stay out of trouble” (Zammit, 2011, p. 206).

As tuition driven institutions from pre-school to higher education vie for tuition dollars, there are too many examples of pedagogy being replaced by marketing strategy. “Subjecting a public good like education to commercial logic is generally disastrous” (McChesney, 2013, p.52). McChesney adamantly details the fundamental incompatibility between education and market-based values such as consumerism theory. Families taking college tours seem more like consumers of a fancy vacation--focusing on the quality of food in the dining halls and the amenities offered on campus, than prospective students seeking a life of the mind and intellectual stimulation. The trickle-down theory applies to independent schools where an increase of prospective preschool families who have yet to know who their student is as a learner are weighing the recent graduates’ college outcome as a way of identifying value. With outcome-driven consumers to contend with, more and more teachers are finding themselves to be customer service agents rather than teachers. Yet, selective independent schools, while utilizing marketing strategies to appeal to prospective families, largely remain mission driven and have a history of strong educational and pedagogical philosophies. As a result, today’s school choice landscape is ever more complicated and nuanced. When choosing an independent school over their free public-school option, it’s critical to examine if and how consumerism theory plays a role in parental choice.

Chapter 2 outlined the literature search and review for the study with specific focus on school choice. Chapter 3 will cover research methodology, including: researcher's role, design and methods, participant outline, data collection, interview themes and questions, data analysis, and validity and ethical issues.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study examined insights from the point of view of parents as to why they chose to pay for a private high school education rather than choose a free public option. Little qualitative research exists, from the point of view of parents, regarding the reasons they choose to send their children to selective private high schools at a substantial monetary cost over available free, public options. The question this study posed was: What are parental reasons for choosing to send their child/children to a private, competitive high school over public options?

Researcher's Role

During this study, I, the sole researcher, was employed as the Director of College Counseling at two different NAIS high schools in New York City. I have worked in NAIS member schools since 2001. Prior to working in high schools, I served as the Assistant Director of Admissions at my alma mater, Columbia University, which allowed me to gain great insights into hundreds of private and public high schools around the world. Additionally, I chose for my own child to attend NAIS member schools, and I, too, attended an NAIS school during the latter years of high school. It is important to highlight that based on my personal experience as a student, what I have learned personally about public and private high schools through my admissions and counseling work, and my own school preferences for my child indicate that I may have an implicit preference/bias towards private schools. Given my work in NAIS schools, it is also important to note that I am more familiar with the operations and systems of independent schools than with public schools. It is critical to note that:

...When the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, it is wise to be aware of one's shortcomings and biases that might have an impact on the study. Rather than trying to eliminate these biases or 'subjectivities', it is important to identify them and monitor them as to how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data" (Merriam, 2002, p.6).

In interviewing the participants for this study, I was careful about monitoring and setting aside any personal preferences, values, and opinions so that I was able to listen to my participants with an open mind and without bias. Nonetheless, it's relevant to keep in mind what Bogdan and Biklen (2006) wrote:

No matter how much you try, you cannot divorce your research from your past experiences, who you are, what you believe, and what you value. Being a clean slate is neither possible nor desirable. The goal is to become more reflective and conscious of how "who you are" may shape and enrich what you do, not to eliminate it. (p. 38)

The statement above allowed me to strike a balance between my personal choice regarding private school for my own child, while keeping an open mind to how other parents make their choice. It's impossible not to relate to different points and factors raised by my participants, and by being able to be reflective and aware of my own choices without viewing them as biases helped me focus on the rich information that participants brought to the study. Approaching the study with this frame of mind helped me connect and layer in more data, which added great value to the research.

Design and Methods

The case studies method was used in this qualitative study because it is the most suitable method for answering the research questions. Merriam (2002) highlights that case study allows for in-depth description and analysis of a group of people, the research is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis, and the most applicable method when there is a lack of available theory that adequately addresses the phenomenon. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) further note that the unit of analysis (the sample), not the topic of investigation, characterizes a case study.

The inductive nature of qualitative studies as it relates to the research question informs that interviewing participants is the ideal approach to data collection. The study used a qualitative case study approach with semi-structured individual interviews because it focused on the perceptions of parents who chose to send their child to a highly competitive, private high school. To better understand why parents choose private high schools for their children, semi-structured, individual interviews with 12 participating parents of students in various NAIS member high schools were conducted.

Site

According to the New York (NY) chapter of the National Association of Independent Schools (NYSAIS) there are approximately 133 member schools in NY State. While the data are not broken down to reflect the number of NAIS schools in New York City, or ones that maintain a high school division, there is a large concentration of member schools in New York City. This study is focused on parents who chose an NAIS member high school in New York City, for their child. Although each member school varies in their mission, location, size, and student body, this study focused on those that are not religiously affiliated, have a high school division, and whose

student body is either co-ed or single sex. When choosing a private school option in New York City, such choices are made against an ample array of free available options. Approximately 70 public charter high schools and over 400 public high schools exist in New York City. Although I have worked at two NAIS member schools in New York City, the parents involved in the study are not ones from those schools, except for one. To ensure that data collected was as bias free as possible and that the risk of bias resulting from familiarity is reduced, the participants were not people I have worked with, except for the one at my current school.

Participants

In order to optimize findings, I chose 12 parents of students in various NAIS member high schools for this study through purposive sampling. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) note that purposive sampling assumes that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned (p. 96). The research sought participants who met the following sampling criteria: (1) parents who made a choice to send their child to an NAIS independent school over the available public option, and (2) each parent participant, at the time of the study, had at least one child enrolled at the independent high school of choice so that the choice they made for their child was relatively recent. Collectively, the parents interviewed had children attending ten different NAIS member schools in NYC, ranging from grades 9-12. The 2022-2023 tuition across the schools represented a range from \$55,000 to \$65,850.

Using data collected through the interviews, a profile was created for each participant. To better understand parental choice in deciding on a private school education over a free, public option for their children also requires developing a deeper understanding of parental intentions, expectations, and hopes for their children's future. A variety of factors, such as cultural norms,

social norms, family traditions, etc. may be underlying factors that influence parental choice. As such, the profiles helped provide a fuller context to understanding parents' choosing private schools over their public counterparts. In addition, within each profile I embedded my researcher comments (RC) reflecting my thoughts during the interview, which also provided a structured method for addressing and checking bias.

Participant #1: Joni

Joni is the mother of two sons, one in 9th grade and one in 11th grade. They are attending two different private schools but were in public schools K-8. Joni and her husband are both active parents at their children's schools. In fact, Joni was a lead parent volunteer and she and her husband were big fundraisers for their sons' public schools. Joni is a graduate of Duke University and George Washington University Law School, and her husband obtained both his undergraduate and graduate degrees from Carnegie Mellon University. She is not convinced that where they went to school necessarily impacted their career and life trajectory, but that it possibly provided a baseline. In addition, Joni shared, "My husband and I were lifelong public-school people. I don't even think growing up we knew anybody who was in private school. Our decision to consider an independent school was partly fear based and backup plan based."

RC: Joni seems ambivalent, even uncomfortable, about private schools, a space that she makes clear is unfamiliar and foreign to her and her family. However, she was an ardent public-school parent who, without sufficient success, did everything she could to find ways for her sons to feel seen and heard. While she does not know what to really expect from private schools, she hopes that her children will gain a sense of feeling mattered, which they couldn't find in public school. Joni seems very apologetic about sending her children to private school and makes clear they do not see themselves as private school people.

Participant #2: Xing

Xing is the mother of two sons, one in 9th and the other in 11th grade. They attend the same private school, and were students at a public school, which they chose for the language

immersion program. Xing and her husband are both products of public schools, and she joined the leadership team at her sons' public school to fundraise and resolve administrative issues. She attended New York University for her undergraduate degree and obtained her MBA from the Wharton School of Business at University of Pennsylvania. Xing's husband earned his undergraduate degree from Cornell University and his medical degree from Temple University. As for whether or not their schools impacted their career and life trajectory, Xing does not really think so, but notes that she sees that the MBA alumni network can be useful, although she doesn't use it much because she works in the non-profit space. As someone who ardently believes in the public schools, she shared, "it just failed me so much that we were just like, we can't do it anymore. So, it was me being me, my whole idealistic and philanthropic person versus my family. I need to protect my family and it hurts to do it. It took a lot to pull the kids out. I would've preferred for them to stay there." They only applied to one private school because what mattered was the language immersion program and less so the public or private identity of the school.

RC: Everything about Xing indicated a person who is dedicated to the public cause both in theory and in practice. She seemed resistant to taking her kids out of public schools and kept fighting the public system with the hope that it would work. So, it seems a sheer act of desperation to put her sons into private, which was against everything she believed in, but she had to protect her sons' best interests.

Participant #3: Adam

Adam is the father of three children who started out attending the same private school since kindergarten. Currently, the youngest one, who is in 6th grade, is still attending that school while the oldest is in 11th grade at a different private school and the 9th grader is attending a top public high school. Adam grew up in the United Kingdom, where all his schooling was public. His wife went to public schools K-12, then attended Stanford University. Adam believes that

where they went to school definitely has had an impact on their life and career trajectory, and hence, feels that education is a priority for his children. As such, given the varied experiences of his three children, Adam believes that it's less so about public or private and more about finding the right place that will push his kids the way they want and need to be pushed.

RC: I am fascinated by Adam's perspective. Given his foreign education background, it seems like he's able to be more objective about what matters with regard to education and his children. He seemed matter of fact about the choices he's made for his children, and the ultimate belief that it's not so much about public and private but finding the right match for each student. In fact, when asked if he believes there is a private school advantage, he chuckled and shared, "To be honest, I don't think so."

Participant #4: Helena

Helena is the mother of three children, who all attended private schools. One is now in college, one is doing a post-graduate year at a private school, and one is a 9th grader at a private school. Helena and her husband are immigrants and went to public schools. She attended Fordham University as an undergraduate, during which she was working part time to pay for her tuition. Her husband attended Buffalo University for both his undergraduate and medical degrees. Helena does believe that their schooling has had an impact on their career and life trajectory, and that it's important for her children to share in the values of hard work and service to others through their own schooling.

Helena shared that, "Never in a billion years did I think my kids would go to a private school." However, her concerns about the level of education and the continuity of teaching convinced her and her husband to send all three to private institutions.

RC: What fascinates me about Helena's approach to her children's education is how practical her focus was. In fact, her daughter went to Stuyvesant, which is perceived to be the #1 public high school in NYC, after attending K-8 at a private school. Despite how challenging it was to get into Stuyvesant, it was not the right match for her, and she transferred to another private school. This daughter is now attending United States Military Academy at West Point, which is free. Helena and her husband feel that they have spent their money where they needed to and that their children should find free

options for college, which will also lead to public service. This is an unusual perspective on how to justify choosing private over public for high school.

Participant #5: Don

Don is the father of two daughters—the younger one is currently in second grade and attends public school; the older one attended one private school K-8 and is currently in 11th grade at another private school. Don attended private school K-12 and is a graduate of Amherst College, whereas his wife attended public and religious schools K-12 and obtained her undergraduate degree from Columbia University and dropped out of Harvard Law School to pursue her current career. With regard to career trajectory, given the industry that they are both in, Don believes where they went to college has had a great impact.

RC: Don’s work provides a unique purview into the world of affordability. It’s interesting to see the juxtaposition of his professional role and personal reasons for choosing private school for his daughter.

Participant #6: Paul

Paul is the father of three children, a son who attended public school K-12, a daughter who attended public school K-8 then private school, and another daughter who attended public K-8 and then Brooklyn Tech, but transferred to a private school in 11th grade—she is currently in 12th grade. He and his wife attended a mix of public and private schools prior to college. Paul earned his undergraduate degree from George Washington University and his MBA from Columbia University, and his wife obtained both her undergraduate and graduate degrees from George Washington University. When asked about the impact their schooling had on their career and life trajectory, Paul shared that he feels “undergraduate degrees mean relatively little in the larger scheme of things.” The decision to attend private schools was more circumstantial to each of his children rather than what was intended.

RC: Paul has had an unusual professional background, having served as a former diplomat, worked as a consulting executive, and founded a charter school. His in-depth

understanding and exposure to charter schools was an extra overlay to his own children's schooling choices. He seems to believe that humans are all status seeking and that may be the biggest reason parents choose private schools for their children. However, that is not why his children went to private school.

Participant #7: Melissa

Melissa is the mother of two children who are attending 6th and 9th grades at the same private school. Her eldest child, a daughter, was in public school K-5 prior to going to private school. Her son attended private K-1 due to health issues, then public 2-5 before attending private school. Melissa and her husband strongly believe in the public school system. In fact, Melissa attended public schools her entire life and is a graduate of the highly esteemed New York City public high school, Stuyvesant. She went on to Harvard University for both her undergraduate and law degrees. Melissa's husband is Dutch and went through the public school system in The Netherlands, including Leiden University, followed by degrees from Oxford University, Tufts University, and Harvard University. Melissa does believe that her Harvard experience has opened doors with regard to her career. The decision to send both her children to private school was very much about having a challenging curriculum, school size, and access. Melissa is careful to note that private school, in other ways, is not necessarily in alignment with her family values, noting, "What I don't like right now about private schools is the wealth that is around you." Affordability and grit are concerns for her and her husband. She poignantly shared, "You are groomed to succeed in private schools and in public schools you are groomed to survive. I think there is something very special about being groomed to survive because you could survive anywhere. I don't want my kids to be coddled. I would prefer public versus private any day."

RC: Melissa's first-rate schooling is the envy of anyone who aims to be well educated. Yet, she refreshingly does not benchmark her values and beliefs by the names of the schools she attended. Melissa is surprisingly down-to-earth, modest, and practical in light

of her educational pedigree, which is reflected in the reasons she chose private schools for her children along with her concerns about the private school environment.

Participant #8: Ella

Ella is the mother of a 7th grade son, who is attending public school, and a 9th grade son who entered private school this year from a public school. Both her sons did attend private school in elementary school before attending public middle school. Ella is a graduate of University of South Carolina, and her husband earned his undergraduate degree from Babson, and dropped out of his graduate school program to start his own business. In their case, Ella does not feel that their schooling had any impact on their career or life trajectory. As an active parent at her son's public, community middle school, Ella has helped raise a lot of money and support the school in all ways possible. She shared that, "we were staying down a public path as long as we have great options...I mean, I would like to not be paying this enormous fee for him to go to this school as well as the fact that it is a bubble. It's not like the real world." Yet, when it was time for high school, the best option for her son was the one private school he applied to as backup.

RC: Similar to Xing's experience, it was insightful to hear Ella talk about the public school system with passion and great support. In addition, despite trying everything to support the public system and do everything possible to keep her son in public school, the system failed them and made her choose private school.

Participant #9: Liz

Liz is the mother of a son and daughter who went to public schools K-8, then attended different private high schools. She herself went to a mix of public and private schools in New York City, then obtained her undergraduate degree from Rice University and her graduate degree from Columbia University. Her husband went to Wesleyan University for college and Yale University for graduate school. While she cannot definitively say that their undergraduate

institutions had any impact on their career and life trajectory, Liz definitely shared, “there’s no question from a post-graduate school recruiting perspective that our degrees and where they came from mattered big time.” With many people in their family and social circles from the private school world, plus the fact that they saved a lot of money by sending their children to public schools K-8, it was not a difficult decision to send their children to private high school, especially having engaged in the public high school application process and the disappointment that yielded.

RC: Liz is a font of knowledge. She has in depth knowledge of K-12 schools, not just as a parent, but as a former, senior administrator in the New York City Department of Education. The insights she has on the challenges faced by the public school system are eye-opening. Liz sums up choosing a private high school over public options by saying, “if you can afford it, it’s really hard not to buy it.”

Participant #10: Xander

Xander is the father of two sons, an 8th grader who has been attending a public charter school since kindergarten, and a 9th grader who attended one private school K-8 and has joined another private school for high school. Xander is a first-generation immigrant, who grew up in New York City. Through a community- based organization scholarship program, Xander, for high school, attended the Dalton School, one of the most prestigious independent schools in the nation. He went on to attend New York University for college. Xander’s wife went to public schools K-12, and attended Bronx Science, one of the most prestigious public high schools in New York City. She went on to earn her undergraduate degree from Cornell University. Xander strongly believes that one significant aspect of the private school advantage is its network of people. He shared that “the people advantage is at every independent school in New York City, and this is going to be harder to find at public schools.” Without a doubt if public and private schools were more on an even footing, he would not want to spend so much money sending his

son to a private school. However, when it comes to his children, the right environment means everything in order to thrive and that is worth the expenditure, even if it means making other financial sacrifices.

RC: Given the depth of Xander's personal journey as a first-generation student, immigrant, scholar at an elite private high school, it's insightful to see how he prioritizes pros and cons of public and private schools from a lens that separately prioritizes making use of the access and networks that are at his fingertips.

Participant #11: Kate

Kate is the mother of two daughters who both attended public schools from K-8. For high school, her older daughter chose to attend a private school and is currently in 12th grade; and her younger daughter remained in public school and is currently in 11th grade. Kate attended parochial school K-12, and her husband went to parochial school K-8 and went on to a public high school. Kate declined to name their higher education institutions, but that she attended a large state university, and her husband has both an undergraduate and graduate degree focused on real estate. Nonetheless, Kate is adamant that where you go to college and beyond is critical in a place like New York City. She shared that, "I'm thirty years out of college and people will still ask me where I went to college and still judge [me] on where [I] went to school. Within my profession I don't find that at all. I feel that in Manhattan, I do feel that a lot. The circles I'm in, people do judge you based on where you went to school." With family pressure pushing for public schools and peer pressure for private schools, Kate and her husband felt a lot of push and pull be it sending their daughters to public or private. With regard to choosing private school for her older daughter, it was more about where she would be happy than necessarily the school itself, after all, she was already attending a top public middle school that had a high school division.

RC: What struck me as uncanny was that Kate was the only parent who declined to name the names of any of the schools that she, her husband, and daughters have attended. She notes that she's in circles where people care a lot about where you went to school and can be judgmental based on that. It seems that Kate is conditioned to believe that where you went to college and graduate school does matter and play a big role in New York City and her social circles. Yet, in not sharing the names of the schools her family attended struck me as a self-protective approach to circumvent judgment rather than a position of empowerment, regardless of the names of the institutions.

Participant #12: Coco

Coco is the mother of a college aged son, who attended public schools K-12, and a daughter who attended public schools up until 8th grade. Coco attended a public high school in the suburbs and is a graduate of Princeton University. Coco's husband went to a Catholic high school and holds degrees from Skidmore College and Seton Hall University Law School. With regard to the impact their post high school education had on their career trajectory, Coco shared, "I feel like it probably would've been the same wherever [we] went." They moved to the Upper East Side, where the public elementary schools are very good. Coco was the PTA president and board member at the local public school her children attended. She shared, "I started out really wanting to keep my kids in public. It got more difficult after 5th grade though because everything is sort of about testing as far as the good [middle] schools go." While her son got into a good public middle school and a coveted public high school, La Guardia, then ended up attending Dartmouth College, her daughter did not test as well, and the public options may have been too big. They applied to private schools as a backup as well, but ultimately her daughter is very happy and thriving at her private high school.

RC: Coco's daughter attends the private school I work at. However, for the purposes of this study, she is a great subject. Prior to the interview, I didn't have much interaction with her, and such interactions were always within the realm of college counseling. During the interview I was clear and careful in making sure that the discussion was focused on my research and that Coco was engaged in the same interview that all the other subjects experienced.

Data Collection

The researcher is an inquirer, who keeps in mind the purpose of the research and the research questions while approaching data collection with genuine curiosity about the nature of the case and is always searching for understanding and answers (Lapan et al., 2012, p. 261). It is important to be organized in order to successfully manage data collected. In addition, taking field notes is critical to making sense of data, especially for the purposes of further analysis. Lapan et al. (2012) also note:

The researcher seeks to maintain a “chain of evidence” (Yin, 2004, p. 85) so that any findings can be traced back to the collected data in their original, raw form. During data collection the researcher is primarily describing but may also make notes about potential hunches concerning the meaning behind what is observed or said. The researcher also makes notes about what she is thinking during data collection and early analysis, in the form of dated memos that eventually become part of and inform the analysis and interpretation. The two-column approach is a method of journaling commonly used in case study research. Descriptions and objective data are recorded in one column, and notes of potential meanings or interpretations of the findings are recorded in the second column. (p.262)

Most interviews in qualitative studies are semi-structured (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p.125). As such, this qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to collect data. Using an interview guide helped to maintain consistency in the questions asked to all participants. In addition, using open-ended questions ensured richer data and yielded opportunities to follow up with probing questions to dive deeper into the responses.

The study was conducted via Zoom (zoom.us), a virtual platform. Due to COVID-19 concerns, Zoom was the most viable and efficient way to interview the participants. Both the researcher and participants were located at home or in their workplace for these interviews. The interviews ranged from 45-60 minutes.

There was one interview for all participants. During our interview time, I was able to capture sufficient data from each participant. We had ample time during the interview to go over each of the interview questions, and I was able to ask additional probing and follow-up questions.

The Zoom sessions were recorded with audio and video, as Zoom does not allow only voice recording. However, once the recording was made, a separate audio file was generated without video. As such, no identifying characteristics of the participants were included in the recordings. In addition, real names were replaced with made-up names to further protect the identity of participants.

The study prioritized collecting rich data through semi-structured interviews that employed the use of open-ended questions and probes. RevMax, a web-based transcription service, was used to transcribe the Zoom audio files into transcripts. Soft copies of the transcripts were then entered into Quirkos, a coding software, which helped me organize and code the data.

Interview Themes

Interview questions were formulated from themes found in the literature, along with what was also missing from the literature. The following themes formed the foundation of the research questions.

Affordability

The average tuition at a NAIS member school in New York City is over \$50,000 per year. In light of an abundance of public and free options for high schoolers, what parental considerations help them choose a private school over the available public school? With college on the horizon, and the mounting costs of college tuition that is exacerbated by the national student loan crisis, how do parents justify the significant cost of sending their child to a private high school?

Perceived Value

For centuries, the notion that private schools are mission driven was perceived to be a chief reason that families chose to enroll their children. It's important to examine what the perceived value of a private school education is in the 21st century, and how much parents are willing to pay for that perceived value. After all, the majority of high school students in the US attend public school, and they make up the majority of college applicants, college attendees, and people in the workforce.

Private School Effect/Advantage

In 1966, a dozen years after the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling, Jim Coleman's historically significant Coleman Report, concluded through their studies that students from all backgrounds tended to do better at private schools for a variety of reasons. The Coleman Report led to what's known as the "private school effect." Almost half a century later, what do parents who choose private high schools over public options perceive to be the private school advantage? Does the advantage still exist? If so, who does it benefit?

Interview Questions

Patton (2015) notes:

We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe.... We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meaning they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective.

(p. 426)

The following questions were asked of each participant based on synthesizing and contributing to the extant literature.

1. Did you or your child's other parent (if there is one) attend a private K-12 school?
2. Where did you, and, if applicable, your child's other parent, attend college (if any) and graduate school (if any)?
3. How do you feel your career and life trajectory were impacted by where you went to college and/or graduate school?
4. What are your expectations for your child's private school, if any?
5. In what way has your child's private school experience met your expectations thus far?
6. What would need to be different in your child's public-school options for you to have considered or chosen public over private?
7. If public vs. private school options were on a level playing field, would you prefer one or the other and why?

8. What do you think your child is getting at a private school that they may not be able to receive at a public school?
9. What specific value or advantage do you think a private school education offers over a free public option?
10. In considering your child's preparation for college, career, and life, what role does a private school experience play?
11. How do you justify the cost of a private school education?
12. How are you affording to pay for your child's private school education, e.g., are you paying out of pocket or through savings, are you receiving financial aid or scholarship assistance for your child, or is someone else paying the tuition?
13. Do/did you, and/or your child's other parent, have student debt? If yes, what was the process of repayment like for you?
14. What is the relationship between your own level of savings and debt, e.g., mortgage, retirement, etc. and the cost of your child's current private school and forthcoming college tuition?
15. How does the cost of college factor into your choosing a private high school for your child?
16. How are you planning to afford your child's college education?
17. Before we conclude this interview, is there anything else pertaining to my study that you feel I should know, or we should further discuss?

In order to better understand underlying issues, it was important to probe deeper into responses. As detailed by Merriam and Tisdell (2014), an advantage of conducting interviews is the ability to follow up on questions asked by probing with more questions or comments. By

doing so, the interview can be more organic and yield better data because the interviewer can adjust accordingly during the interview. Prompts such as, “Can you tell me more about ----?”; “What did you mean by---?”; “Can you give me an example of ---?”; “Why do you think that---?” are examples of probing questions that were used.

Data Analysis

Through giving structure and organizing the data collected, the researcher was able to determine how best to tell the story produced by the data. As per Merriam and Tisdell (2015) there is an interactive relationship between collecting, analyzing, and reporting data:

Data collection and analysis are simultaneous activities in qualitative research. Analysis begins with the first interview, the first observation, the first document read. Emerging insights, hunches, and tentative hypotheses direct the next phase of data collection, which in turn leads to the refinement or reformulation of questions, and so on. (p.191)

After each interview, I began to transcribe the data. Once the transcript was created, reading it thoroughly allowed me to process the data, take notes on observations, track questions, and build from the first case study towards refining subsequent cases. Each interview generated its own set of data, which collectively created a large body of data. Therefore, in order to optimize the volume of data collected, being organized was critical. Through coding, themes that transcend the various cases were identified, which gave meaning to the data.

Case studies can be designed in many different ways. Lapan et al. (2012) note that single case studies/analysis are those using just one incidence or example of the case at a single site. They also detail that multiple case studies/cross-case analysis is often used to compare different cases, and can be multiple cases at a single site or multiple sites. This study uses both single case

analysis to identify themes within each participant and cross case analysis to identify themes across participants.

Single Case Analysis

When analyzing data, I treated each participant as a single case. The use of single case analysis allowed me to better make sense and make use of each individual participant's experience and understanding. It was important to connect with the data through methods such as highlighting and making notes, in order to identify and categorize patterns and themes. The single case analysis is primary and important to creating the overall framework for data analysis.

Cross-Case Analysis

Cross-case analysis is a research method that facilitates the comparison of commonalities and differences in the events, activities, and processes that are the units of analyses in case studies (Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008). Once the individual case analysis was completed, cross-case analysis was used to further identify the relationships that may be related through the themes in individual cases. All cases were reread, and their codes and themes were reviewed to identify the themes that were the most dominant across the cases. Cross-case analysis allowed me to look at the cases to see if they fall into thematic clusters or groups that share patterns or configurations, which are critical to answering the research question (Miles & Hubberman, 1994, p. 174).

Validity Issues

Quintão and Andrade (2020) note that in the process of using a case study, the reliability and validity of the process and the results achieved must also be analyzed. For this purpose, several criteria should be considered, such as construction validity, internal and external validity,

and reliability. By fulfilling these criteria, it can be guaranteed that the study methodology was planned in a logical way, where all components relate to each other in a structured way.

Additionally, this approach allows the investigation to be effective and the desired results to be achieved (p. 272).

Participant Selection

To ensure that the study generated unbiased data and a cross section of perspectives, twelve participants were selected through purposive sampling. There was a mix of parents with children attending ten different private high schools in New York City. In addition, the researcher purposefully chose parents who represented different ethnic and racial groups, as well as different socio-economic backgrounds and professions. To maximize data collected from each interviewee, each participant was advised that their participation was completely anonymous, and I, the researcher, needed to be careful and skilled with asking and re-asking research questions, engaging probing questions, and keeping detailed and organized notes.

Site Selection

While the participants have children in different private high schools in New York City, the site selection was simplified by the pandemic. With in-person meetings complicated by COVID-19, interviews were conducted via Zoom, which made the site uniform and consistent across participants.

Reliability of Participant Interviews

I made clear that all interviews were confidential and no individual information was to be shared with the school that their child attends or with any other institution. Further, no individual identifiers were used, and pseudonyms were created. In addition, all interviews were conducted while the subject had a current child in private high school.

Ethical Issues

There are very limited ethical issues in this study. Participants do not know one another, and their participation is not shared with the institution their child attends private high school. Neither coercion nor deception were used. In the one case where the participant has a child at my institution, both the researcher and the participant agreed to only discuss matters related to the research.

Chapter 3 outlined the research methodology, including: researcher's role, design and methods, participant outline, data collection, interview themes and questions, data analysis, and validity and ethical issues. Chapter 4 will cover findings from the study, including themes and sub-themes.

Chapter IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand parents' reasons for choosing a competitive, private high school, over an available free public option. Independent schools have long held a strong presence in the nation's educational landscape. However, as more families consider how they will pay for college, independent schools are facing new realities and challenges. Also, with Millennials, often dubbed "the new sandwich generation", projected to make up the majority of parents of all school children by 2024, a deeper understanding of how parents choose private over public school is critical. Literature on school choice is prevalent. Nonetheless, literature that speaks to parental choice with regard to private schools is not abundant.

This study focused on parents who currently have a child/ren in private high school in New York City, whose child/ren had previously attended public school and/or considered public high school options before choosing a private high school. Through semi-structured interviews I explored each subject's personal reasons for choosing a private high school for their child/ren over the free and available public options. Pseudonyms were used hence protecting the identities of the subjects. The interview focused on individual parental reasons that led to choosing a private high school over public options, which ensured that this study yields a clear understanding of the topic.

The heart of this chapter is data analysis and the presentation of my findings through the major themes that emerged from the interviews to answer the research question: What are parental reasons for choosing to send their child/children to a private high school over public options?

Three overarching themes emerged from the interviews related to the primary reasons parents send their children to a private high school over public options: (1) Affordability, (2) Perceived Value, and (3) Private School Effect/Advantage. In addition, several sub-themes were identified: (1) parents' pro-public-school attitude, (2) the perceived failings of the public school system, (3) the challenges of private schools, and, ultimately, identifying the (4) best match school based on each child's needs. These themes overlapped and created an intricate and interwoven framework from which to answer the research questions.

Overarching Themes

Affordability

The average tuition at a NAIS member school in New York City is over \$50,000 per year. In light of an abundance of public and free options for high schoolers, it is valuable to understand parental considerations that help them choose a private school over the available public school. With college on the horizon, and the mounting costs of college tuition that is exacerbated by the national student loan crisis, how and why parents justify the significant cost of sending their child to a private high school is key to understanding their choice.

Perceived value plays an important role in parents choosing private schools over public schools for their children. In addition, concerns over what is not working in the public school system further emphasizes parents justifying paying private school tuition.

Based on the data collected, parents acknowledge that the cost to attend private school is very high. And, for most of the parents, they did not themselves attend private school, so this cost is not one that is familiar to them. Yet, based on what is best for their child, they chose to make the investment. Being in positions where they can afford the private school tuition, having paid off their own student loans (of those who had them), having savings for college, being frugal and

making deliberate financial sacrifices, prioritizing their children's education, and viewing the years their children attended public school as built-in savings are themes that are echoed by every parent in the study.

All but one of the parents interviewed were fully paying their children's private school tuition. In light of their ability to send their children to private school, all parents acknowledge the big price tag that comes with a private school education and share a general sense of prioritizing their children's education over all other elements of their financial planning. Paul, the one parent receiving financial aid, made clear that in addition to the aid, "we are lucky in that regard to have savings." Xing, who comes from modest means and felt pained to have to choose private school over public for her sons, shared, "We're blessed that we have the cash and I'm not making a hard trade-off [financially]." However, Xing clarifies that as someone in the nonprofit world, what was hard for her was relinquishing her personal belief in supporting the public good, recognizing that that ideal was hurting her children. She realized that when it came to her family, she needed to protect them from an ideal that was not dynamic for them. Yet, she would have preferred for them to stay in public. Others felt peer pressure from their own family, like Kate, who, while they can afford it, shared, "We were very conflicted about [sending my daughter to private school] especially since I think I had some influence from my family. They asked me why would you spend all that money on private school? That's crazy. People save money to send their kids to college and you're starting that tuition now." Yet, Kate added, "It's hard because there are pros and cons to both. But it's sort of like, well, if we can pay for it, we will." Joni noted, "We were aggressive about the 529 Plan whenever we could be, and those funds grew. We are pretty much set for college and super grateful to be able to do that. And we're also generally frugal people. As such, we ended up getting our heads around paying for what's really

a fundamentally very simple concept—that we want our kids to go to a school where they’re going to be happy.”

It was clear that parents choose what is best for their children’s education, and if that comes with a big price tag, they will find a way to pay for it. Don explained, “The real question is, what else are you going to do with the money? I’ll tell you what we didn’t do. We did not buy a second home. We did not do any number of the other things that people do with their money around here.” Similarly, Adam shared, “Of course, everybody has their price point. We’ve been extremely fortunate that we have earnings that can pay tuition, but it means compromises. Our bed is fifteen years old, our couch is twelve years old, and we haven’t renovated our apartment.” Melissa echoed, “There’s nothing more important than [our children’s education] and it’s much more important than that extra vacation or doing up a home or whatever it is. It limits our choice in the type of jobs we choose. But we do it very, very much deliberately. We are conscientious about where we spend our money. That is how we justify [paying for private school]. Can we keep up with it? We can right now. Could there be a time when we can’t keep up? You never know, especially in this type of environment, which is very scary. And that is something that we certainly think about all the time. We’re lucky that we have enough retirement savings. If we had to tap into that for them, of course we would do that.” Ella, like Xing, was very committed to the public school system and came from modest means. But, after years of doing everything she could as a parent to keep her children in the public system, she shared, “Ultimately when it comes down to my children, I’m going to give them whatever advantage I can.”

Choosing private school and having to afford it is beyond just having the means to do so. Don confessed, “[When it comes to] our offspring and their preparation for life and our own anxiety about pushing them out into the world, it’s hard to behave totally rationally. When

you're facing this stuff down, you're kind of worried sick about how they're going to be able to fend for themselves, whether they're going to be able to achieve the same success that you have. A lot of people are willing to pay \$500,000 to a million bucks to give their kids what they think will be an extra 10% or 30% oomph." Akin to Don, Coco shared, "When we first started out when the kids were little, we're like, we'll never send them to private. We would never pay for that. We need to save for retirement. And then you have your kids and you're like, if this is even going to make their lives 10% better and we have the means to do it, we're going to do it. And we're lucky that we're in a position to. Retirement is pushed off a little bit, but it's been worth it. I have to say, I feel like [my daughter's] education has been a hundred percent worth it."

When it comes to choosing a private school and having to pay the hefty tuition, Liz succinctly sums it up when she shared, "I think you can stay in public and work through it and it will be fine. But I think if you have the money and [recognize the perceived value in private schools], it's really hard to not buy it."

Perceived Value

For centuries, the notion that private schools are mission driven was perceived to be a chief reason that families chose to enroll their children. It's important to examine what the perceived value of a private school education is in the 21st century, and how much parents are willing to pay for that perceived value. After all, the majority of high school students in the US attend public school, and they make up the majority of college applicants, college attendees, and people in the workforce. Ultimately, parents want the best for their children so that they can be prepared to lead successful lives and weather the unknowns that so many parents are driven to protect their children from. We cannot foresee what the future will bring, nor can most parents assess the true quality or value of the education their child is receiving. As Liz, who was the

senior administrator at the DOE, put it, “They don't know what they are experiencing. So what they're looking for are symbols that suggest quality to them. That's why gifted and talented programs are so sought after because it is something that you can hang your hat on that says this is going to be a quality program. And there are very few symbols that give parents a sense of reassurance and confidence in the quality of the school. So simply by the nature that a school is private, that they have screened admission, that you're paying for it, that they may have these long histories or reputations—those are all symbols of quality in a school.”

As such, perceived value is symbolized mainly by these three areas:

1. Curriculum: That there is differentiation and rigor
2. Scale: That the size of the school in terms of student:faculty ratio is small, which means ample available resources and opportunities for both students and teachers.
3. Extracurricular Activities: That there are more activities, sports, and other opportunities for students to be involved with multiple extracurricular activities.

Private School Effect/Advantage

In 1966, a dozen years after the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling, Jim Coleman's historically significant Coleman Report, concluded through their studies that students from all backgrounds tended to do better at private schools for a variety of reasons. The Coleman Report led to what's known as the “private school effect.” Almost half a century later, what do parents who choose private high schools over public options perceive to be the private school effect/advantage? Does the advantage still exist? If so, who does it benefit?

Often people think that going to a private school increases a student's chances of gaining college admissions to elite schools. Yet, several parents were adamant that that is an antiquated concept in today's hyper-competitive college admissions landscape. Paul firmly stated, “I don't

think it's the college pipeline. It's not, you know, the 1930s when Loomis would send a list down to New Haven of the twenty-five boys who were going to attend Yale that fall. That ship sailed a long time ago. It's smaller class sizes that offer greater potential." Similarly, Liz and her husband went to prestigious colleges and had wonderful experiences, which they hoped for their own children. However, she noted, "It never occurred to either of us that our kids would ever go to Harvard. There are a lot of other schools besides Harvard." For Kate, who had to navigate her college application process entirely on her own because her parents were from a different country and there was little support in her public high school to guide her, she shared, "I'm hoping that [the school and my daughter] are going to manage [the college process] themselves for this amount of money." Don was even more precise in stating, "People who are sending their kids to New York City private schools right now because they think it's going to get them into a better college are factually wrong. [If] they think that's what's going to get them into the very best colleges, they are out of their minds. Because the point of the exercise, if you're going to spend this kind of money, is the quality of the lived experience."

The lived experience comes in many forms. From the data gathered, parental expectations from their children's private school speaks to these experiences, and three main areas rose to the top—student success, relationships, and extracurriculars. There are many points of overlap with all these areas. Within student success, many elements such as more academic rigor and more personalized attention contribute to a greater sense of mattering, which ultimately contributes to student success. As for relationships, the lived experience is achieved through close contact with teachers, peers/friends, administrators, alumni, and broader networks to develop a web of resources that will grow with you throughout your lifetime. Various elements that contribute to student success are also critically tied to building relationships, such as smaller class sizes that

allow students to have closer ties to their teachers. In addition, opportunities take on many different forms, e.g., a rich selection of extracurricular activities, an abundance of sports teams that are accessible to interested students and not just the best athletes, access to a variety of resources—all of which improve students' sense of self, help them feel like they matter, and encourage their development of confidence and self-reliance.

Sub-themes

Parents' Pro-Public School Attitude

Of the twelve parents interviewed, the majority experienced public schools in their own K-12 educational journey. Only one parent, Don, attended private school K-12, seven parents went to public schools K-12, and four others experienced a combination of public and parochial/private throughout their K-12 experience, with only two of the four, Adam and Liz, having attended a private high school. As a result, 25% of the study participants actually attended a private high school themselves.

All parents, including Don, who went to private school K-12, strongly believe in the public system, and that it should be what works for everyone. The general attitude is that if there is anything not working well in the public system, then it's imperative that those who care and have the means should be part of the solution. Ella shared, "I'm a very pro-public school person. I've always been someone who's helped raise lots of money for the school, ran the school auction, and was PTA treasurer." Xing also shared, "I joined the school leadership team. I tried to do what I could to fundraise and resolve some of the administrative stuff. I believe that anyone who has resources and pulls their kid out of the public school system just harms the public school system." Coco took on similar activism and leadership roles, and stated, "I was PTA president for a few years. I was on the board most of the time I was there." Joni also noted that

she and her husband were active volunteers and financial supporters at their children's public schools, and that they always participated, helped, and gave above and beyond what was expected because they very much believed in the public system and their role in making it good and better. Melissa, who went to public schools K-12 and attended a top public high school, Stuyvesant, poignantly shared, "You are groomed to succeed in private, and in public you are groomed to survive. I think there is something very special about being groomed to survive. You could survive anywhere. I don't want my kids to be coddled. So that's why I would prefer public over private any day."

The Perceived Failings of the Public School System

While there is overwhelming commitment and belief in the public school system, there are many failings that drive out even the most ardent champions of public schools. To start with, there are various concerns over consistency in school leadership and classroom experiences. Xing, who was an ardent champion of public schools said, "So we had eight years and eight teachers, of which two were miserable. I would say four were amazing and two were more just fine." She elaborated that if her sons' public-school experiences were even just fine, she would have kept them in public. However, each son had a horrible teacher, one after another, and that, to her, equated to two lost years of learning and was simply not acceptable. Liz, who was a former high ranking official in the New York City Department of Education explained that the DOE schools are very much run by individual principals, who can vary tremendously from school to school. When it was her daughter's time to choose public or private, the public they had hoped for had a principal they did not like. They thought, "I'm sure it's a perfectly fine place if everything goes right, but if something goes wrong, he is not the person who is going to be in our corner." Helena echoed that, "Never in a billion years would I think my kids would go to a

private school. But, when I started talking to different parents, the message was universal— there really was no continuity between each grade.”

The public-school admissions process, be it for public high school or middle school, creates many points of concern and barriers to entry. As a result, even parents who are firm believers in the public school system turn to private schools for more options—often as a backup. Be it not testing high enough to be considered for the top testing high schools, drawing a low lottery number and fearing the resulting options, getting into a school that is too far to commute to, or simply ending up with a school that is not a good match are some of the pressing reasons that parents consider private school options. Joni sums it up by saying, “Our decision to consider an independent school was partly fear based and backup based.” Xander felt that the public-school placement process was complicated, arcane, and absurd. He shared, “Because of the lottery system, my son didn’t get into any of his schools, even though he’s academically rigorous. So that strengthened our resolve, and we were lucky enough to do so, to put him in a [private school] where he could succeed.” Similarly, Adam, preempting the possibility of getting the last option on his son’s list of schools, shared, “[My son had] an impossible list. He needed a backup option because he could literally be offered number 11 [out of 12 non-testing high schools you can list on your high school application] on his list. We needed a solid backup option.” Parents want options for their children, and Melissa sums it up this way, “It’s always better to have options rather than options made for you.” And, Don shared, “[My daughter] got wiped out in the public process. She got into her eighth choice. Go figure, right? Dalton was her safety school.” Ultimately, Kate explained that the public school selection process is one of the biggest problems in and of itself—“It shouldn’t be that the kid who’s not a straight A student has to go to a failing, unsafe school.”

In light of inconsistencies with public school leadership and learning experiences, and the challenges of the admissions process, public high schools, including the very top ones e.g., Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, and Brooklyn Tech, have many systemic challenges. Size, access, and resources are the areas that present the most concerns. In Helena's case, her daughter got into Stuyvesant and went there in 9th grade. However, it was a really traumatic experience. She felt that the administration was not only uncaring but couldn't do very much to support students academically and socially. As a result, transferring out into a private school was what her daughter did in 10th grade. In Paul's case, his daughter was attending Brooklyn Tech, a high school that has over 7,000 students. The size was a true challenge from the start, and when compounded by COVID and virtual learning, things became untenable. As such, his daughter also transferred out to a private high school in 11th grade, despite having been in public schools her entire life. For Liz, her son was choosing between Beacon, another coveted public high school, and a private school. He ultimately chose the latter, though he does ponder what his experience would have been like if he had attended Beacon. Melissa's daughter chose her current private school over Bronx Science because the commute time each day would be more than two hours. Xander noted that his son's former classmate, who attended the same small, community school K-8, is having a hard time at Stuyvesant because of the dynamic shift in scale. As a result he is struggling. And another friend whose child attended Brooklyn Tech from a smaller, private school regretted that choice. To see a thriving middle schooler struggle after getting into such a selective public school was devastating—the support and sense of community were simply not there and in hindsight, his parents would have taken him out instead.

While the majority of students attend public school, it seems that the public system best matches those in the middle. Xing sums it up this way, “If there's a person in the middle, and the

middle is like a big middle, it's like 60%, it's going to be fine because teachers teach to the middle. It sucks completely for people who are below [the middle] and really need extra resources. But there's nothing for the top either." Adam shared that, "The public school system could have done a better job addressing his daughter's needs. Yet, she was not quite low enough on the scale to merit any attention. [The schools] are big and not looking for trouble where they don't need it." Or, as Ella opines, public schools have to teach to the lowest common denominator, dumb down academics, are getting less funding, and have more safety concerns—all reasons to consider private schools for solutions. Ultimately, public schools are not ideal environments for students at the top, bottom, or those with special needs, be it learning differences, physical challenges, etc.

Private School Challenges

Parents who choose private school for their children have many positive reasons for making that choice. However, along with the upsides are genuine concerns. The parents in this study shared that excessive wealth is one main concern regarding the private school community. Don said it's like "swimming in the muck of the 1% lifestyle. Like the Upper East Side might as well be a foreign country. These are very much not our people." He noted that his "approach to the whole experience is anthropological—what is this culture, who inhabits it, how can I learn or benefit from being around it." And his advice to his daughter is to "approach the whole wealth culture at school with an arched eyebrow." Liz also shared, "The level of money was overwhelming. There was no morality police on it. None." In addition, Melissa is careful to note that the level of wealth at private schools is not in alignment with her family values, noting, "What I don't like right now about private schools is the wealth that is around you."

Paul understands that there are upsides to private schools being far more homogenous than their public counterparts, but one area that lacks the most diversity is the socio-economic makeup of his daughter's school. His daughter is one of three kids in the senior class who does not have a second home. While she has certainly benefited from invitations to other people's second homes, Paul is happy that his daughter understands the absurdity in thinking that not having a second home is a claim to being less advantaged. Similarly, Xing, who was an ardent volunteer and fundraiser at her sons' Title I school, where her family was considered one of the wealthiest, quickly realized the depth of wealth at her sons' private school when he returned from a friend's house and explained that there was a basketball court inside their actual apartment. When Joni made the switch, she, too, felt the equation shift dramatically. They went from being active parents and one of the generous donors at their public school to feeling uncomfortable about having to donate to their son's private school annual fund despite paying a hefty full tuition. To this point, Ella explained that her son also returns from friends' homes and describes how extravagant they are. Thus, Ella shared, "I think it's interesting because while financially we're comfortable, we're not wealthy." And, even despite all the reasons for which she chose to put her son in private school, Ella also candidly noted, "I would like to not be paying this enormous fee for him to go to [private] school as well as the fact that it is a bubble. It's not like the real world." Melissa stated, "You are groomed to succeed in private schools and in public schools you are groomed to survive. I think there is something very special about being groomed to survive because you could survive anywhere. I don't want my kids to be coddled. I would prefer public versus private any day."

Best Matched School

In choosing the right school for their child, parents have many considerations that are not as black and white as public versus private. Ultimately, it's about finding the right match. Coco explained, "I simply wanted to see my kid thrive, sort of just really be happy and excited at where they are." In Xing's case, her children were in a public language immersion school, and finding an alternative meant prioritizing language immersion. Xing clearly noted, "It was less about public versus private. It was more about the right school for my kids." For Kate's daughter, who was attending a public middle school that included a top public high school division, it was less about the public school than finding a new environment. Kate shared that, "[My daughter] went on the tours and she was really drawn to the private schools. So that kind of led to the decision. So even before we found out about where she would get in at specialized high schools or other DOE schools, she had made her decision that she wanted to go to a private school." Seeing one's child happy plays a critical role in choosing the right school for them. As Liz and her family were going through the public and private high school application process, Liz and her husband knew the exact moment when their daughter showed the signs of having found the right school—when she skipped all the way home after a visit to the private school she currently attends. For Paul, his oldest daughter's learning disability was not being served in the public school system, and he and his wife had no choice but to seek alternative options. Ultimately, Adam, who has one student at a top public high school and one in private, sums it up by saying that he does not feel that there is an academic advantage at private schools. Instead, for him, choosing the right school means finding the right environment where his children felt pushed in needed ways.

Student Success

Many elements contribute to student success. Certainly, strong academics is required, but more precisely, parents are looking for personalized attention so the child who needs an extra boost will get that boost, and the student that requires support for learning differences or social-emotional sensitivities will receive what they need. Each child matters to their parents and parents are looking for schools that share that view on a tangible level. Students must feel like they matter in order to thrive. Joni shared that for her son, “We chose [private school] where there is a low teacher to student ratio, where my kid was going to matter. A place where his unique learning styles were going to be leveraged to his benefit and where they were going to get to know him.” Similarly,

Xander explained that it is important for his son to be in a smaller school community because it allows for a very curated experience—one where if something goes wrong, parents can easily jump in and get the support and partnership needed from the school.

The fact that private schools have a low faculty to student ratio benefits every aspect of student experience and success. For Xing, she was used to being part of the solution at her children’s public school. Yet, when she had some concerns about her son’s math class at his private school, she was able to easily meet with her son’s academic dean and math teacher, and walked away with a simple solution they offered—that they will create a separate math class to meet her son’s accelerated math learning. This was a stark departure from Xing’s public-school experience. Kate discovered that the smaller scale at a private school allows the administration to keep up with matters such as bullying. One of the reasons her daughter left her previous public school was due to the administration's inability to manage issues amongst students. Therefore,

this level of proactive school management allows students to have the sense of safety that's needed in order to focus on academics, explore extracurriculars, and thrive.

Relationships

Relationships are the key to success. Given the size and available resources at private schools, having strong relationships with teachers, peers, and alumni form the building blocks to success in life. Don shared, “[We wanted our daughter to find] “intellectual intimacy with the grownups, in particular teachers who were really going to take her in, push her, challenge her, and expect more from her. And, for her to be surrounded by kids who cared a lot about ideas.” This sentiment was echoed by Melissa, who noted, “Our expectations are that we wanted our children to have smaller environments where they can really continue the relationships they develop with their teachers, and also be in an academically challenging environment.” Kate made clear that she and her husband did not know what to expect from private school. They simply wanted their daughter to have options outside of the public school she was in. In their case, their daughter had experienced social group/friendship challenges in middle school, and their daughter’s choice to attend private school was the lead they followed. Nonetheless, Kate identified that what she is most satisfied with are the good friends her daughter has made and her access to playing sports.

The value of relationships is something that is hard to put a price tag on as it remains with you for life. Xander, who himself attended private school, shared, “Once I [arrived] at Dalton, things became possible because I saw them all around. There were captains of industry. There were people who built large scale companies walking through the halls. I’ve read a study recently that said you could actually calculate the trajectory for a child’s lifetime earnings based on their peers. It was a very simple thing. So, you put your kid in better schools and they’ll do

better. You put your kids around people who are doing better, and they will do better. And I think that going to Dalton changed what I thought about everything in one fell swoop." He went on to say that you simply cannot find the level of people advantage in public schools that you will find at every independent school in New York City. In fact, recently he was at a gathering with various alumni from his high school and it turned out that a fellow alumnus asked what he's been working on. Upon learning about a project Xander was seeking funding for, he offered the needed funding through a project he was working on. Similarly, but from another vantage point, Melissa, who went to Stuyvesant then Harvard, shared that she had a former business partner who went to Riverdale Country Day School. Every time they had to raise money for their business, the majority of funds came from friends he went to Riverdale with as they are essentially New York's elite in terms of private equity and banking.

Melissa also shared an experience that highlights what private school students possess that is hard for public school students to understand the value of strong teacher relationships. She explained that her classmates from Harvard who went to private schools like Riverdale and Dalton had a much better understanding of how the world works than she did in college. She said that while classmates were attending professor office hours because they were so familiar and comfortable with having close relationships with their teachers from private high school, she missed out on this learning opportunity for the first two years of college because at Stuyvesant, one only met with teachers outside of class if you were in trouble. For Melissa, up until college, going to school was just about being in class, and she learned that private school students received far more than just the classroom learning experience.

Extracurricular Activities

Activities outside of academics make up a big part of the lived experience at private schools. Be it clubs, organizations, affinity spaces, internship opportunities, or sports, private schools offer such opportunities in greater abundance than their public-school counterparts. Parents who choose private schools indicate that the opportunities their children gain through extracurricular activities comprise a big part of why they pay for private school. For both his daughters, Paul shared that he expected from their private school experience greater attention, greater expectations of the students academically, and greater opportunities in the extracurricular fields. Similarly, Melissa explained that with more attention placed on students in private schools, they are better able to develop various interests that are difficult or not possible in public school settings. She mentioned that athletics in private schools are structured in more meaningful ways, and music programs are usually stronger as the school is well resourced. There is simply more consistency and far less to have to worry about.

To Melissa's point regarding athletics, Xander shared, "At Brooklyn Friends, if you want to play a sport, you can. It doesn't guarantee that you'll actually get any playing time, but you'll be on a team and get to go to practice and cultivate teammanship. If my son had gone to Brooklyn Tech, which has 7,000+ students, he would have to go through a tryout process and be selected to be on the team. While he is now a great swimmer, sometimes competition made him nervous, especially for a tryout. So, there's no guarantee that he [would have gone] through the trial to even get the opportunity to be able to show his prowess. So, the opportunity to be able to get to the point where he's confident enough to be able to show his mettle would not have even occurred in public school where he might have been cowed into silence."

Parents choose private schools for various advantages. And, these days, the private school advantage may no longer be about just mission and college placement, but they are very much about personalized student success--valuable lifelong relationships and the opportunities available through the various networks of people and extracurricular offerings. The advantage of private schools is that they are more student centered, smaller, and are better resourced, which allow for a more consistent and balanced experience for students and parents. Kate who concurrently has a daughter in private school and another in public school posited, "There's a lot more homework from my younger daughter in public school. She's working all the time. Whereas my older daughter is less stressed and has a smaller workload, which is very beneficial to her. I feel badly for my younger daughter...because she has a lower quality of life than my older daughter who is in private school."

This chapter outlined findings from the study, including themes and sub-themes. Chapter 5 will introduce the conclusion and recommendations for this study, including recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

Chapter V

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose for this qualitative case study was to describe parents' reasons for choosing a competitive, private high school, over an available free public option. Independent schools have long held a strong presence in the nation's educational landscape. According to the most recent 2020 numbers published by the Council for American Private Education, private schools made up 25% of all schools in America in 2016. Secular schools accounted for approximately 22% of that grouping. In addition, NAIS members accounted for 4.8% of all schools in the U.S. By comparison, in 2016 NAIS had 1,672 member institutions versus 1,233 in the 2020-2021 school year, indicating a 25% decrease. The culture of independent schools is based on mission and the mindset that if you build it, they'll come. However, as the nation's student loan crisis persists and more families consider how they will pay for college, independent schools are facing new realities and challenges. When choosing an independent school over their free public-school option, it's critical to examine if and how consumerism theory plays a role in parental choice.

The extant literature largely ties school choice to vouchers. Much of school choice literature has been linked to Freedman's free market theory—take your tuition dollars to where you will be most satisfied. When tied to the concept of vouchers, choice allows parents to choose between their zoned public schools, charter and magnet schools, as well as to use vouchers to attend private schools. In reality, few American parents can use school vouchers as there are approximately only 14 states, not including New York, that offer a voucher system. Within the few states that use school vouchers, the governing policies vary from state to state along with the definition of private schools—most private schools that participate in the voucher system are not NAIS member schools.

Until recently, there has been scant literature examining the value of a public-school education beyond the fact that it is “free” versus the actual value of a private school education beyond its published cost. In fact, mismatched data that compares per pupil expenditure in the public system vs. tuition rather than actual cost per student in private school settings is a prime example that more relevant literature is needed. Further, recent contributions to the school choice literature debunk market theory notions of the private school effect. Most notably, Lubienski and Lubienski found that private schools are not necessarily outperforming public schools, and that much of the policies and reforms being dictated by market theory are flawed at best and need to be questioned. In addition, Pianta and Ansari (2018) concluded from their research that when controlling for socioeconomic characteristics in students and families, the advantages of a private school education are eliminated. With so many conflicting factors at play in the school choice landscape there exists little qualitative research from the point of view of parents regarding the reasons they choose to send their child/children to competitive private high schools at a substantial monetary cost over available free public options, especially outside of the framework of school vouchers.

As a result, today’s school choice landscape is ever more complicated and nuanced. When choosing an independent school over their free public-school option, it’s critical to examine if and how consumerism theory plays a role in parental choice. With NAIS membership noticeably decreasing in recent years, independent schools will benefit from knowing what actually drives parents to choose an NAIS member independent school over their public option.

In this study, I examined the reasons parents in New York City, where school choice is not tied to voucher usage, chose private high school over an abundance of public options. In this regard, contrary to Forster (2016), the parents choosing private over public high schools in New

York City are not any more able to hold public schools accountable than when their children were in that system. I found that the choice to attend private school is not tied to the bulk of the literature related to school choice being predicated on the voucher system. As such, this study introduced parental choice outside the context of school vouchers.

The main research question was, “What are parents' reasons for choosing to send their child/children to a private, competitive high school over free public-school options?” The three overarching themes that emerged from the study: (1) Affordability, (2) Perceived Value, and (3) Private School Effect/Advantage, along with the additional sub-themes: (1) parents' pro-public school attitude, (2) the perceived failings of the public school system, (3) the challenges of private schools, and (4) best match school based on each child’s needs, together created and defined the value proposition for parental choice.

Perceived Value

A key conclusion from this study was that perceived value is the primary factor behind parents choosing to send their children to private high schools over public options. Bassett (2010) defined value as perceived outcomes divided by perceived price. He expounded on the fact that the new financial normal that was born out of necessity during the Great Recession is here to stay. Over a decade later, his finding is furthered by the global impact COVID has had on all aspects of life and an even greater need for independent schools to secure their future with new approaches that better reflect a deeper understanding of parental choice.

When examining school choice in New York City, which does not offer a voucher system, Lauen’s key findings tie to my conclusions:

(a) choice is more likely exercised by higher income and educated parents in wealthier neighborhoods (each of the twelve study participants fall into this these categories);

(b) students in high performing neighborhood schools tend not to exercise choice (as exemplified by several of the study participants who enrolled their children in high performing neighborhood schools prior to private high school), and;

(c) students in low-performing neighborhood schools generally stay in assigned schools rather than choose other school options.

In addition, my conclusion shares commonalities with the findings of Lareau (2014), that academic quality means different things to different parents; and Altenhofen et al., (2016), that non-academic factors were actually stronger driving factors, e.g., good teachers, social networks, reputation for academic quality, and child's safety in parents choosing charter schools in a wealthy Colorado suburb.

Ultimately, what most closely defined perceived values in this study were the metrics used in the 2017 Gallup study titled, *NAIS-Gallup Report on NAIS Graduates*. Their research examined a life well-lived with regard to the following measures:

- Purpose Well-Being: Liking what you do each day and being motivated to achieve your goals., e.g., Joni noted, "...we ended up getting our heads around paying for what's really a fundamentally very simple concept—that we want our kids to go to a school where they're going to be happy." Coco explained, "I simply wanted to see my kid thrive, sort of just really be happy and excited at where they are."
- Social Well-Being: Having strong and supportive relationships and love in your life, e.g., Don shared, "[We wanted our daughter to find] "intellectual intimacy with the grownups, in particular teachers who were really going to take her in, push her, challenge her, and expect more from her. And, for her to be surrounded by kids who cared a lot about ideas." This sentiment was echoed by Melissa, who noted, "Our expectations are that we

wanted our children to have smaller environments where they can really continue the relationships they develop with their teachers, and also be in an academically challenging environment."

- **Financial Well-Being:** Managing your economic life to reduce stress and increase security, e.g., low student: faculty ratio ensures ample available resources and opportunities for both students and teachers.
- **Community Well-Being:** Liking where you live, feeling safe and having pride in your community, e.g., Kate explained that the public-school selection process is one of the biggest problems in and of itself—" It shouldn't be that the kid who's not a straight A student has to go to a failing, unsafe school."
- **Physical Well-Being:** Having good health and enough energy to get things done daily, e.g., Joni's goal to have her sons feel seen, heard, and mattered made all the difference in choosing a private school.

Findings From My Study

From my findings I concluded that even parents who chose to pay for a private high school for their children voice concerns, complaints, and share a longing for more public virtues. The main disparity is the lack of socio-economic diversity. Don said it's like "swimming in the muck of the 1% lifestyle. Like the Upper East Side might as well be a foreign country. These are very much not our people." And his advice to his daughter is to "approach the whole wealth culture at school with an arched eyebrow." Liz also shared, "The level of money was overwhelming. There was no morality police on it. None." In addition, Melissa is careful to note that the level of wealth at private schools is not in alignment with her family values, noting, "What I don't like right now about private schools is the wealth that is around you."

In my findings, those who exercised the choice to send their child to a NAIS member high school in New York City, seem to have the means to do so even without a voucher system, as opposed to those in states that offer vouchers that free-market theorists attempt to justify. Many of them were ardent financial supporters of the public schools their children attended and helped expand access to better programming and staffing. Henig (1995) found that in order for choice to work, it requires a complicated web of constant financial commitment, political clout, and dissociation from market theory. As such, when families leave the public school system for private school, often due to dissatisfaction with their children's experience in light of their advocacy, they negatively impact financial commitment and political clout, which, collectively, further exacerbates the problems they couldn't fix and are leaving behind. Xing's example speaks directly to this dilemma, "I joined the school leadership team. I tried to do what I could to fundraise and resolve some of the administrative stuff. I believe that anyone who has resources and pulls their kid out of the public school system just harms the public school system." In the end, she chose private over public for her sons because they were hurting in the public system. Such examples further exemplify Logan's point that choice further highlights separate and not equal in our school system.

Akin to Mornar's 1996 findings, parent choice in NYC does obviate that choice in this regard, outside of vouchers, absolutely benefits middle/upper class families. There is a parallel between parental choice in NYC with regard to those who argue for choice via vouchers. But it may be that in both cases, the true beneficiaries are middle/upper class families, and such choice does not hold public schools accountable--quite the opposite--it takes away more of the families that can help public schools leaving more families who have less means and access in a system that continues to downward spiral with no one holding them accountable.

Common vs. Individual Good

Every single parent interviewed unequivocally stated that if public and private schools were on a level playing field, they would choose public over private, including parents who themselves attended private high school. While parents in my study genuinely believe in the common good of public education, and many did everything possible to keep their children in public schools, the individual good of their child supersedes all notions of public schools being a common good. Ultimately, public schools are not ideal environments for students at the top, bottom, or those with special needs, be it learning differences, physical challenges, etc. Ella, after years of doing everything she could as a parent to keep her children in the public system, succinctly shared, “Ultimately when it comes down to my children, I’m going to give them whatever advantage I can.”

Finding Empowerment in Choice

Ultimately all parents want to feel empowered and that they can choose what’s best for their child. Choosing private school involves many considerations, including a significant financial commitment. It seems that the public middle and high school admissions process has created a gateway for many public-school parents to view private schools as a backup and/or solution to the challenges of the public-school landscape. Joni shared, “My husband and I were lifelong public-school people. I don’t even think growing up we knew anybody who was in private school. Our decision to consider an independent school was partly fear based and backup plan based.”

Additionally, the overwhelming size of many of the top public high schools, the distance from home a student may need to travel each day to their allocated public school, and the general lack of consistency in teachers and courses, resources, and student support sometimes drive out

even top students, who end up choosing to attend private high schools. In Helena's case, her daughter got into Stuyvesant and went there in 9th grade but transferred to a private school for 10th grade as a result of a traumatic year with little support or care from the administration. In Paul's case, his daughter was attending Brooklyn Tech, a high school that has over 7,000 students. The size was a true challenge from the start, and when compounded by COVID and virtual learning, things became untenable. As such, his daughter also transferred to a private high school in 11th grade, despite having been in public schools her entire life. For parents who want their children to thrive, be happy, develop strong relationships with teachers and peers, private school allows them to feel empowered in choosing what's best for their children—putting the choice in their hands. As Melissa poignantly shared, “It's always better to have options rather than options made for you.”

Cost vs. Value

All parents in the study shared that they would rather not have to pay private school tuition if they did not have to. However, if they can find a way to afford the experience of private school for their children, they absolutely will, even if it means making lifestyle and retirement sacrifices in order to do so. Adam shared, “Of course, everybody has their price point. We've been extremely fortunate that we have earnings that can pay tuition, but it means compromises.” Melissa echoed, “There's nothing more important than [our children's education] and it's much more important than that extra vacation or doing up a home or whatever it is.”

In wanting the best for their children so that they can best hedge for an unknown future, parents justify private school costs in various ways. It's no longer just about college placement or academic rigor. They see real value in smaller class sizes, where students can forge stronger relationships with teachers and peers in order to thrive and grow as lifelong learners. There's also

real value in having better access to opportunities and resources, e.g., developing a stronger sense of self through the abundance of extracurricular, athletic, and leadership experiences that are readily available. Being in a strong community of teachers, peers, alumni, and parents, allow students to tap into networks and resources beyond their four years of high school—ensuring a lifetime of benefits that they can continuously utilize. As Liz shared, “I think for a lot of people [a private school education] is a reassurance. It creates a sense of confidence that your child will get attention, will get taught, and will get quality.” Many parents also justify time in public school as time during which money was saved for private school tuition. Overall, the value of a private school education far surpasses its cost. Liz succinctly observed, “If you can’t afford it, you will find it—charter, public plus private add ons like tutors and college counselors, home school, move to a different location. [However,] if you can afford it, you will buy it.”

Summary of Interconnected Themes

The three overarching themes: (1) Affordability, (2) Perceived Value, and (3) Private School Effect/Advantage, along with the additional sub-themes: (1) parents' pro-public-school attitude, (2) the perceived failings of the public school system, (3) the challenges of private schools, and (4) best-match school based on each child’s needs, are interconnected. It is difficult to isolate just one without involving the others. For example, when considering affordability, parents focused a lot on the perceived value of a private school education alongside the actual cost involved. When they dived into perceived values, much of what they identified fell into private school advantages, often in general terms of smaller class sizes, stronger relationships, and more opportunities in, and especially outside of, the classroom. Specifically, much of what was identified as advantages were very particular to each child, such as the need to be seen and heard, better administrative management of social issues, and resources for both gifted students

and those with learning difficulties. All discussions tied back to experiences related to the public schools, be it from a social and political standpoint or frustration with the public system not being adequate for their children. As experienced throughout this study, the overarching themes and sub-themes are very much interconnected.

Recommendations

Recommendation for Policy

Finn (2013) explained that the number of independent schools closing is on the rise. With the exception of the very elite institutions, economically surviving into the future is beyond a simple enrollment and tuition dollar equation, but one where systems and cost structures need to be revamped. On the public-school front, parents across the nation complain about reduced funding and services. As per this study, those who can afford private school will choose that for their children, which exemplifies Logan's 2018 findings that choice (with or without a voucher system) continues to harm the very people it is touted by the free-market theorists to support. With these concerns in mind, the following are recommendations for policy.

NAIS as a body must reexamine best practices for membership schools with regard to enrollment and tuition setting, and better identify cost vs. value. In addition, it is important to reevaluate membership eligibility and the mission of the organization in light of declining membership, the increase of for-profit schools (many are also NAIS members), and the increasing number of "free" school options represented by charter and magnet schools and homeschooling. As an important membership organization, NAIS needs to shape policy that informs reform and innovation in school leadership, governance, and overall student success.

On the public-school end, The Department of Education in large, urban centers, such as New York City, needs to provide an accurate accounting of what they offer, what students and

teachers need, and address the ever-widening gap between the two. Presenting facts with transparency will garner stronger backing for advocacy and needed legislation to increase budgets, provide resources, and to help students experience a successful K-12 public school experience. It is important to drill down and present parallel details for charter and magnet schools, as well as data on homeschooling. Policy should be made that addresses all public schools, and not just a particular subset of schools. Policies that encourage new partnerships with private entities that can benefit the public school system, e.g., colleges and universities and other not-for-profit entities, such as charitable foundations, should be explored.

Recommendation for Practice

At a time when our society and culture place tremendous value on a college degree, the mounting pressures of affording a college education combined with the many alternatives to independent schools that are more readily available from preschool to high school, independent schools need to rethink where they stand in the educational marketplace. Of course, college is important, but the focus has to be far more substantial than just a mere four years after high school. To quell parental concerns about so many unknowns that their children will face in the unpredictable future means independent schools cannot just focus on college results because education is not just about college.

Focus should be on life-long learning in the form of future careers (many may not even exist yet given how fast technology changes compared with what most parents are familiar with in their own lifetime) and living a purposeful and meaningful life. This can be accomplished by shifting attention away from the college list, standardized testing, and grades as a measure of student success, to creating innovative programs that help high school students apply their knowledge across disciplines, especially in areas of technology and science, along with the arts

and humanities. Involving alumni and parents to serve as mentors and resources for educational programming, internship and research opportunities, and industry exposure not only benefit the students, further the lessons taught by teachers in the classroom, and add tremendous value for strengthening the school community inside and out. Ultimately, a strong and connected school community adds significant value to every institution.

Independent School Management (ISM), Measuring Success, and the National Business Officers Association (NBOA) (2017) found that tuition increases did not have a negative influence on enrollment in independent schools. They note, “the distinctive missions of our individual schools and the effective execution of that mission—known as perceived quality, perceived value, or distinct value proposition—are the more important determinants for enrollment stability...If families do not perceive a high-quality education with a strong value proposition, increasing tuition or even keeping it flat or reducing it will still result in dropping enrollment.” Ultimately, “It’s the mission and excellent execution of that mission that are the significant enrollment stabilizers.” As such, it is critical to have a modern mission that is not based on the antiquated concept of if you build it they’ll come”, but one that factors in the perceived value that parents are seeking.

With regard to tuition and costs, there needs to be a more dynamic approach to budgeting, tuition setting, and rethinking spaces and resources in a way that is commensurate with perceived values. Hardly does an independent school tuition represent the much higher cost of a student’s actual education, and actual cost alone only scrapes at the true value of an independent school education. With tuition at an all- time high and an abundance of free and available options in public schools, it is critical to both understand and deliver what parents actually want, while steering clear of consumerism at the same time.

Cooper (2017) highlighted the need for a mindset shift in independent schools to innovate and change to meet the demands of a new generation of parents—Millennials. The crux of Cooper’s message was this: As the price of tuition continues to outpace inflation, and more school choices are available to families, independent schools need to move away from the, “if we build it and retain it they will come” model. The price of tuition justifies the perception that independent schools are a luxury. And, as such, there has been significant research done on marketing luxury products to Millennials. While many educators may balk at the concept that education is a product, and a luxury product, no less, Cooper’s analogy is worth noting. While you can’t upend decades, even centuries, of school culture and tradition, it’s time to revamp school marketing efforts to focus on market demands.

The single most important innovation Cooper had put in place was routine family surveys. Cooper was careful to point out that these surveys were not just about how students were doing in the school community, but, just as important, how parents were experiencing the same community. Surveying was a tool that was embraced at his school, which required a culture that believes in, values, and acts on the feedback. Cooper stated, “[We] sought to proactively address the small deficiencies or miscommunications that, left unchecked, can lead to attrition or a feeling of dissatisfaction that drives parents to seek different options.” Schools should pay more attention to not just students, but parents, throughout a student’s private school experience. Having a solid survey strategy in place can yield much needed feedback and data.

Schwartzman (2016) found that educational consumerism is a source of many problems in our education system. He may be at odds with Cooper’s treatment of education as a luxury product. In fact, he expounds that market mentality has no place in education and that “adopting this framework frays the moral fabric of education and shortchanges students by configuring

them as consumers to placate rather than characters to build.” Commodifying education has shifted the role of students from learners to consumers and teachers from scholars to customer service specialists. Pedagogy has been replaced by customer satisfaction and intellectual stimulation and discourse have been replaced by what is more comfortably attained through rote learning, busy work, and anticipated outcomes chiefly via grades and test scores. Students as consumers simply want to obtain a degree to certify that they are qualified to work. In fact, “subjecting a public good like education to commercial logic is generally disastrous” (McChesney, 2013, p.52). So rather than focus enrollment and marketing efforts on outcomes such as the college list, which more and more parents realize is not the main purpose of choosing a private school, or engage in the facilities arms race, focus on the mission of the school, the benefits of a lifelong community and the cultivation of lifetime learning. The components of a life well lived as outlined in the 2017 Gallup study titled, *NAIS-Gallup Report on NAIS Graduates*, are key. When parents recognize the immeasurable value of their child’s private school education, they will naturally justify the cost of tuition.

Bassett drew from NAIS’s book *Affordability and Demand*, the Independent School Leadership’s *Head to Head* newsletter (November, 2009), as well as other NAIS research to provide important guidance for independent school financial governance. A key takeaway was that more funds should go to endowment as more funds are raised, including from tuition. Budgets should not be entirely based on tuition income and important programs and amenities need a careful reevaluation. The purpose of the school board is not solely financial but needs to be about securing the school’s future. In reality, these are not earth-shattering concepts, but, quite frankly, ones that independent schools have not figured out how to manage as a group because increasing tuition (usually at a rate that outpaces the increase in consumer price index/inflation)

has been the foundation of the old normal. It is time to rethink how tuition is set and how fundraising and advancement can be in closer alignment with perceived value.

Financial sustainability is nothing new, but how Bassett presents it in light of the new normal post the great recession (and now since COVID), is a profound concept. Once again, a shift in how value is defined is key. This is a reminder to all involved in independent schools that business as usual and tuition-driven fiscal models need to be replaced with a values-driven approach. Bassett's quote from one of the NAIS trustees succinctly sums it up, "If you are not a school of the future, you may not be a school *with* a future."

Recommendation for Future Research

The free market, non-voucher choice parents are making in favor of private schools in NYC, is, as per the findings, largely due to public schools failing to provide consistency in quality of education, teaching, and leadership. If all else was equal between public and private high schools, parents unequivocally said they would choose the public option. My study found that the choice to pick private high school over public options is largely due to dissatisfaction with the public school system, and that choice, as per Henig (1996), can definitely work better as part of a bigger solution to public school reform. In addition, since COVID, the demographic changes in New York City have impacted public and private school enrollment across the board. Also, my study focused on NAIS high schools in NYC, although many of these schools also offer lower and middle school divisions. It would be interesting to see how parents choose those grade levels versus just high school. With these factors in mind, the following are recommended topics for future research:

- Enrollment trends in the New York City public testing schools, especially as the city threatens to remove testing from the admissions process: It is worth understanding how

public policy changes may impact parents' choices in either staying in the public system or trying private schools.

- Enrollment trends at NAIS schools made by Millennial parents: This could be focused on one market, such as I did with New York City, or can be expanded to a regional or even national study. It can examine only NAIS high schools (especially when the upper end of Millennials comprises the majority in the parent body), only NAIS middle schools, only NAIS elementary schools, or K-12 NAIS member schools. To zero in on how and why Millennial parents choose private schools will be tremendously valuable for NAIS schools, especially since the majority of school age children in this country by 2024, will have parents who are Millennials.
- Enrollment trends in the smaller and newer subset of NAIS schools—the for-profit members, as opposed to the traditional non-profit NAIS schools: Similar to the above, the research can be focused locally, regionally, or nationally. And the study can zero in on high school, middle school, elementary school, or K-12. These schools seem to have heard what parents are seeking, but not finding elsewhere; global school networks, an emphasis on STEM/STEAM/IT, a clear message that fundraising is not part of the picture. Schools like BASIS Independent are thriving across the globe. It's worthy research, especially for membership organizations such as NAIS, and for traditional private schools to better understand the success of this newer category of schools.
- Enrollment trends between NAIS member schools vs. other non-NAIS member private schools, religious schools, and home-schooled students. Since NAIS member schools represent the more selective and most expensive grouping of private schools, it is

valuable to understand enrollment trends at non-NAIS private schools and how parents are choosing them.

- Pianta and Ansari (2018) concluded from their research that when controlling for socioeconomic characteristics in students and families, the advantages of a private school education are eliminated. As such, future research focused entirely on families receiving financial aid would be important.
- It's also worthwhile to conduct research to see if/how public schools can replicate what parents want in private schools.

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Appendix A
IRB Informed Consent Form



Informed Consent Form

Seton Hall University
Institutional Review Board
JUNE 23 2022
Approval Date
Expiration Date
JUNE 22 2023

Title of Research Study: Parents' Reasons for Choosing to Enroll their Child at Private High School
Principal Investigator: Terry Kung

Department Affiliation: Education Leadership Management and Policy (ELMP), Seton Hall University

Sponsor: This research is supported by Education Leadership Management and Policy (ELMP), Seton Hall University

Brief summary about this research study:

The following summary of this research study is to help you decide whether or not you want to participate in the study. You have the right to ask questions at any time. The purpose of this study is to describe parents' reasons for choosing a highly competitive, private high school, over an available free public option. Independent schools have long held a strong presence in the nation's educational landscape. According to the most recent 2020 numbers published by the Council for American Private Education, private schools made up 25% of all schools in America in 2016. Secular schools accounted for approximately 22% of that grouping. In addition, NAIS members accounted for 4.8% of all schools in the U.S. By comparison, in 2016 NAIS had 1,672 member institutions versus 1,233 in the 2020-2021 school year, indicating a 25% decrease. The culture of independent schools is based on mission and the mindset that if you build it, they'll come. However, as more families consider how they will pay for college, independent schools are facing new realities and challenges. Therefore, it is critical to study parents' reasons for choosing a private high school over an available free public option.

You will be asked to participate in an initial interview via Zoom (45-60 minutes), and participate in a follow-up interview via Zoom (45-60 minutes). We expect that you will be in this research study for up to an hour for the first interview and up to an hour for the follow-up interview. Participation should take no more than 2 hours over the span of approximately a year during the time the researcher is gathering and analyzing data.

Risks/Discomforts:

While there is minimal risk to this study, there is one potential risk with regard to breach of confidentiality, e.g., if an interview is overheard, if unauthorized access is gained to the researcher's laptop, or if identifying data is compromised.



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Benefits:

The main benefits of participation are:

- The study will add to the literature on school choice, from the perspective of parents sending their children to private schools over free public options.
- Study findings can help independent school leaders better understand their value proposition and secure/sustain the school's future in a competitive marketplace where the number of independent schools is on the decline.
- Study findings can also better address if there is a private school advantage, and what that may be if one exists, which can help parents better understand school choice from this lens.

Purpose of the research study:

You are being asked to take part in this research study because you (1) made a choice to send your child to an NAIS member school over the available public option, and (2) have at least one child currently in said independent school.

Your participation in this research study is expected to be for approximately a year, during the time the researcher is gathering and analyzing data.

You will be one of 12 people who are expected to participate in this research study.

What you will be asked to do:

Your participation in this research study will include one in-depth interview (1 hour max), and a follow up interview (1 hour max). The interviews will be recorded on Zoom. While the Zoom sessions will be recorded using separate audio tracks, Zoom does not allow for audio only recordings. Therefore, all Zoom sessions will be recorded with both video and separate audio files. To protect the identity of participants, each participant will be assigned a pseudonym and only the audio recording will be used when transcribing the data. The video recording will not be used for any part of this research study. Only the researcher will have access to the recordings, which will be stored on her password protected laptop. After the data has been transcribed, and for a maximum of three years after this study, all recordings will be erased.

The interview protocol will start as follows: you will be assigned a pseudonym, which will be used during the transcription of the audio recording. I am the only researcher so you will only be interacting with me for this study. We will have a conversation during which I will ask questions related to the following research questions:

- What are your reasons for choosing to send your child to a private, highly competitive high school over the free public school options?
- What do you perceive to be the private school advantage
- How does affordability factor into choosing a private school over free public school options?



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The anticipated timeline is for the first interview to be conducted sometime during 2022. When the first round interview data has been collected and processed, I will reach out in the first half of 2023 to conduct a follow-up interview. Your participation will be confined to these two points of participation, which shall not exceed 2 hours of your time total over the span of approximately a year, during which I will be gathering and processing data.

Your rights to participate, say no or withdraw:

Participation in research is voluntary. You can decide to participate or not to participate. You can choose to participate in the research study now and then decide to leave the research at any time. Your choice will not be held against you.

Confidentiality and privacy:

All information gathered in this study will be kept confidential. No reference shall be made in written or oral materials that could connect participants to this study.

The interviews over Zoom involves a secure connection. Terms of service and addressing confidentiality may be viewed here for [Zoom](#). Upon recording the interviews, any possible identifiers will be deleted by me, the investigator. You will be identified only by a unique subject number/pseudonym when I transcribe your interview. Once all data is transcribed Your email address, which may be used to contact you to schedule a study visit will be stored separately from your interview audio and video files. All information will be kept on a password protected computer only accessible by me, the researcher. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used.

Data sharing:

Data collected from this study will not be shared with anyone outside of the study

team. Cost and compensation:

There is no payment for your time to participate in this study.

Conflict of interest disclosure:

The principal investigator and members of the study team have no financial conflicts of interest to report.



Informed Consent Form

Contact information:

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this research project, you can contact the principal investigator Terry Kung at terry.kung@student.shu.edu, Dr. Christopher Tienken at Christopher.Tienken@shu.edu or (973) 275-2874, or the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board (“IRB”) at (973) 761-9334 or irb@shu.edu

Participant Consent:

I hereby consent to participate in this research study and give permission to being recorded over Zoom.

Participant Name (Please Print) Signature of Participant Date

_____ Terry Kung _____

Principal Researcher Name Signature of Researcher Date

Appendix B
Request for Approval of Research

**REQUEST FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH, DEMONSTRATION
OR RELATED ACTIVITIES INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS**

All material must be typed.

PROJECT TITLE: ___Parents' Reasons for Choosing to Enroll their Child at Private High School

CERTIFICATION STATEMENT:

In making **this application**, I(we) certify that I(we) have read and understand the University's policies and procedures governing research, development, and related activities involving human subjects. I (we) shall comply with the letter and spirit of those policies. I(we) further acknowledge my(our) obligation to (1) obtain written approval of significant deviations from the originally-approved protocol BEFORE making those deviations, and (2) report immediately all adverse effects of the study on the subjects to the Director of the Institutional Review Board, Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ 07079.

___ **Terry Kung** (Terry Kung) _____ RESEARCHER(S) OR PROJECT DIRECTOR(S) DATE ___ 4/4/22

Please print or type out names of **all researchers below signature.
Use separate sheet of paper, if necessary.**

My signature indicates that I have reviewed the attached materials and consider them to meet IRB standards.

X **Christopher Tienken** (Christopher Tienken) RESEARCHER'S ADVISOR OR
DEPARTMENTAL SUPERVISOR _____ DATE 4/4/22

Seton Hall University 3/2005

Appendix C

Approval for Dissertation Proposal



06/24/2022

Terry Kung
Seton Hall University

Re: Study ID# 2022-330

Dear Terry

The Research Ethics Committee of the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved your research proposal entitled "Parents' Reasons for Choosing to Enroll their Child at Private High School" as resubmitted. This memo serves as official notice of the aforementioned study's approval as exempt. Enclosed for your records are the stamped original Consent Form and recruitment flyer. You can make copies of these forms for your use.

The Institutional Review Board approval of your research is valid for a one-year period from the date of this letter. During this time, any changes to the research protocol, informed consent form or study team must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to their implementation.

You will receive a communication from the Institutional Review Board at least 1 month prior to your expiration date requesting that you submit an Annual Progress Report to keep the study active, or a Final Review of Human Subjects Research form to close the study. In all future correspondence with the Institutional Review Board, please reference the ID# listed above.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Mara C. Podvey, PhD, OTR
Associate Professor
Co-Chair, Institutional Review Board

Phyllis Hansell, EdD, RN, DNAP, FAAN
Professor
Co-Chair, Institutional Review Board

Office of the Institutional Review Board

Presidents Hall · 400 South Orange Avenue · South Orange, New Jersey 07079 · Tel: 973.275.4654 · Fax 973.275.2978 ·
www.shu.edu

WHAT GREAT MINDS CAN DO

Appendix D

Protecting Human Rights Certificate



Completion Date 03-Apr-2022
Expiration Date 02-Apr-2025
Record ID 48021889

This is to certify that:

Terry Kung

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher
(Curriculum Group)
Social-Behavioral-Educational
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic Course
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Seton Hall University

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.



Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w1fa1b3b0-d5ce-4b29-9861-69a3239f5808-48021889

Appendix E
Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Guide
Parents' Reasons for Choosing to Enroll their Child at Private High School

Question 1:

In what way has your child's private school experience met your expectations thus far?

Question 2:

What would need to be different in your child's public school option for you to have considered or chosen public over private?

Question 3:

If public and private school options are on a level playing field, would you have a preference for one or the other and why?

Question 4:

Did you or your child's other parent (if there is one) attend a private school?

Question 5:

What do you think your child is getting at a private school that they may not be able to receive at a public school?

Question 6:

What specific value or advantage do you think a private school education offers over a free public option?

Question 7:

In considering your child's preparation for college, career, and life, what role does a private school experience play?

Question 8:

How do you justify the cost of a private school education?

Question 9:

How are you affording to pay for your child's private school education, e.g., are you receiving financial or scholarship assistance for your child, is someone else paying for their tuition, are you paying out of pocket or through savings, etc.?

Question 10:

Do/did you have student debt?

Question 11:

Where does the cost of college factor into your child's private school attendance?

Question 12:

How are you planning to afford your child's college education?