

**Parental Involvement and School Choice**  
**A Look at Private School Choice in Cleveland and Milwaukee**

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### **Introduction**

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Proponents of choice argue that parents who have greater ability to choose a school will be more likely to immerse themselves in the life of the school. One basic outcome of this policy is the belief that by providing vouchers to parents allowing them to choose a school, they are empowered to become involved with their children's education. In almost every case, if there was the choice between more parental involvement or less, people would opt for more because of the belief that parental involvement plays a critical role in the academic achievement of a child. The question addressed here is one that goes to the heart of this belief. Is the act of providing a choice enough to get a parent involved with a child's education?

Our research suggests that the answer to this question is "no." This is based on two important findings from research on school choice in Cleveland and Milwaukee. First, we found that for the parents we interviewed in Cleveland and Milwaukee, parental involvement is very low on a list of priorities that they look for in a school. Second, the act of choosing a school in itself does not guarantee that parents will be involved with a child's education. In examining a sample of private choice schools in Cleveland and Milwaukee we found that the majority of private choice schools require parents as a condition of admission to volunteer time in the school. Other choice schools offer reduced tuition for parents who volunteer in the school. These choice schools believe that the physical presence of a parent in the school is important to a child's achievement. But even more important, these schools understand that requiring parental involvement is necessary for getting parents in the school.

This finding is important for both private choice schools and traditional public schools. At this time, when policymakers argue for more parental involvement, it is important that we acknowledge that choice alone does not automatically correlate with this involvement. The added requirements created by private choice schools are necessary for obtaining parental involvement. If parental involvement is positively related to student achievement, as common wisdom suggests, then it is important that policymakers examine the methods for getting more parents involved in a school. This is especially important as the distinction between traditional public and private schools is blurred as both types of schools receive taxpayer funding.

This policy report explores this topic. We first view the issue of parental involvement from the perspective of parents whose children attend both private and public schools in Cleveland and Milwaukee. Next, we examine what parental involvement means for the majority of private choice schools. Finally, we focus attention on the question of allowing public schools to require parental involvement as an admission requirement. We want to point out that as with all research projects there are limitations to our data. It was not possible to conduct our research in all public and private choice schools in Ohio and Wisconsin. We rely on findings from a sample of public and private choice schools in Cleveland and Milwaukee. For this reason, while we believe the findings have merit beyond the cities of Cleveland and Milwaukee, it would be inappropriate not to stress the possibility that the findings are unique to these cities. Before examining our findings we briefly look at the literature on parental involvement.

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## **A Look at the Literature**

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Most research on parental involvement and academic achievement indicates that, all other things being equal, children whose parents are involved in school do better than their peers. For example, Steinberg et. al., found during ten years of research on school reform, including parent engagement in education, that being an involved parent correlates with student success (1996). Steinberg, et. al., noted that the problem for schools and parents was that there are many different ways for parents to be involved in their children's education and it was hard to determine which types of involvement work best. However, they found that the type of parental involvement that parents practice most often - checking over homework, encouraging a child to do better, and overseeing the child's academic program from home while not harming a child's performance in school - made surprisingly little, if any, positive difference in student performance, especially once a child had reached high school. These behaviors may play a role in stimulating achievement during elementary school, but evidence of their usefulness diminished once a child had entered secondary school.

Their research shows that the type of involvement that makes a real difference is the type that actually draws the parent into the school physically. Such actions as attending school programs, extracurricular activities, teacher conferences, and "back to school" nights are the important variables that related to achievement. These sorts of activities make a small but significant difference in student achievement. In this paper we refer to this type of involvement as on-site involvement. The authors found that when this sort of on-site involvement occurs regularly, it reinforces the view in the child's mind that school and home are connected, and that school is an integral part of the whole family's life. They state that attending school functions may be even more important for the message it communicates to teachers and other school personnel. They believe that teachers cannot help but pay closer attention to students whose parents they encounter frequently at school programs. This attention by the teacher plays a positive role in a child's academic achievement (Steinberg 1996, p.124-125).

Do choice schools lead to more on-site parental involvement? Many proponents of choice argue that parents who have greater ability to choose a school will be more likely to be involved. Melissa Marschall examined parental involvement in a 1998 study. She used data from a survey of parents whose children attended elementary and middle schools in two New York City school districts that differed on the amount of choice that parents had in selecting a school. She measured parent's formal involvement in school using five measures. Two of these measures were on-site -- volunteering and attending school activities. The other three measures were contacting school officials regarding school policy, participating in the PTA and voting in school board elections. She found that parents who chose their school were more involved than parents whose children attended assigned schools (1998 p. 17). The parental involvement variable used in this study was an additive scale. Because all five measures were combined into one variable it was not possible to examine the variance for each individual parental involvement variable. This study did not provide evidence of more on-site involvement in choice schools. Other research does look at the relationship between both on-site parental involvement and other types of parental involvement across both choice and assigned schools.

Caroline Minter Hoxby used data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS) and Common Core of Data (CCD), and found that increasing parental choice tends to increase parental involvement (Forthcoming, p. 22). She used a combined measure of parental involvement that included five factors, two of which were considered on-site factors and three that were the more common parental involvement factors. The on-site factors included whether the parents visited the school and if the parents attended regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences. The other more common measures include off-site activities such as whether the parents discussed high school curricular choices with their children or if they attended meetings of the PTA. When each of these factors was examined separately the only on-site factor that was statistically different across these schools was the number of times parents visit the school in a year. The findings indicated that parents who chose a school, visit the school more frequently than parents who were assigned to a school. Hoxby did not examine achievement outcomes of these students. Yet, we may speculate that, if the findings of Steinberg et. al., are valid, then all else being equal, this factor could relate to higher achievement for these students.

The Hoxby study provides some credence to support the conclusion that, in school districts where parents are offered more choice, parents are more involved with the school. However, the Marschall and Hoxby studies are limited to public school systems that differ on the amount of intra-district choice that parents are offered. Our research took a broader look at the issue by examining parental involvement in a sample of public and private choice schools in the only two cities in the country where private school choice exists, Cleveland and Milwaukee. Our analysis looked at the following questions: First, when parents are choosing schools, is the issue of parental involvement a factor in this decision? If not, how do private choice schools encourage parental involvement?

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## **Data**

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In order to examine this issue we relied on data obtained through interviews with 270 parents and educators and a public opinion survey conducted in September, 1997 with taxpayers in Ohio and Wisconsin. These data offer an opportunity to explore the issues of what parents look for in a school from the perspective of those individuals immediately affected by these private choice school programs. In addition, the survey provided a perspective from taxpayers on their attitude toward parental involvement requirements for schools participating in choice. While we believe the findings have merit beyond the cities of Cleveland and Milwaukee it would be inappropriate not to stress the possibility that the findings are unique to these cities.

The interviews were conducted between February and May of 1997 by a team of 11 interviewers. Table 1 illustrates the number of completed interviews. The data for this report were part of a larger project investigating choice school accountability.<sup>1</sup> To contact the parents and educators we first chose a sample of five public schools and five private choice schools in each city. The goal in choosing our sample of schools was to represent the typical public and private choice school in the two cities.<sup>2</sup> The majority of our parent interviews came from parents affiliated with one of these 20 schools. However, in order to ensure a broader sample of parents, we also interviewed parents attending a public and private school fair in Milwaukee. In addition, we

interviewed a randomly selected group of parents from those that applied to the Cleveland Scholarship Program. In our interviews we asked two questions related to parental involvement. The first question was: *Assuming you could have all the information you wanted about a school, what would you want to know about schools in order to make a decision about where to send your own child?* This question was rephrased for teachers and administrators who were asked their perception of what parents want to know about a school when making this decision. We followed this question with a series of questions that probed parents for specific responses toward a number of factors that we hypothesized parents may look for in a school. In regard to parental involvement we asked: *Is there anything you need to know about parental involvement in a school? Do you look for information on opportunities or requirements for parent involvement at a school? What kind of information do you want?* These questions were open ended. The key findings were the result of analyzing the responses to open ended questions from individuals rather than requiring individuals to choose from a list of attributes developed by members of the academic community (see Worthen and Sanders 1987, for a discussion of this method).

**Table 1. Number of Interviews by School-Based Respondents.**

	All	Cleveland Private Choice School	Milwaukee Private Choice School	Cleveland Public School	Milwaukee Public School
Parent	153	34	40	35	44
School Administrator	25	7	7	5	6
Teacher	92	22	22	26	22
Total	270	63	69	66	72

The survey was administered by telephone to a random sample of 771 taxpayers from Ohio and Wisconsin in September, 1997 (See Table 2). The telephone survey consisted of 28 questions that grew out of the responses to the open ended interview questions. One of these survey questions focused on the issue of parental involvement. This question asked respondents the following: *Please tell me whether you agree, disagree or have no opinion with the following statement: Private schools participating in a choice program should be allowed to require parents to work as volunteers in the school.* The results of this question helped us to understand public support in Ohio and Wisconsin for parental involvement requirements.

**Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Sampled Respondents and of the Adult Population in Ohio and Wisconsin on Selected Social Characteristics.<sup>3</sup>**

Characteristic	Ohio Sample	Ohio Population	WI Sample	WI Population
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Percent of Adult Population, Age, 35 and above	65%	62%	67%	63%
Gender, female	55%	52%	53%	51%
Ethnicity, African American	12%	11%	12%	5%
Median Household Income	\$39,000	\$36,000	\$39,000	\$38,000
Education, 1 or more years of college	30%	22%	28%	16%

## **Findings**

The interview data indicated that parental involvement was not a major factor that parents mentioned when they were choosing a school for their children. In response to our first open-ended interview question we found that parents at both public and private schools overwhelmingly wanted to know what was being taught at the school and the method of teaching. In Table 3 these criteria are identified as “school program.” On the other hand, only 19 of the 153 parents we interviewed indicated that they looked at parental involvement issues when choosing a school.

**Table 3. Criteria Recommended by Parents in Cleveland and Milwaukee**

	PARENTS (N=153)
School Program	59%
Teachers	45%
Outcomes General	35%
School Characteristics	31%
Safety and Discipline	28%
Outcomes Test Scores	15%
<b>Parental Involvement</b>	<b>12%</b>
Reputation of School	9%

Note: The total percentage exceeds 100%, because respondents on average mentioned between two and three criteria.

There was essential agreement among parents, across both public and private schools, on the importance of parental involvement issues when they choose a school. As Table 4 indicates, 13% of public school parents look at this factor compared to 12% of private school parents.

**Table 4. Parental Involvement: Category Selected by Private Choice School and Public School Parents in Cleveland and Milwaukee.**

Stakeholder Group	Private Choice School Parent (n=74)	Public School Parent (n=79)
Parent	12%	13%

There was also essential agreement on the importance of parental involvement factors for both public and private school administrators. As illustrated in Table 5, 7% of private school administrators mentioned this factor compared to 9% of public school administrators. However, there is less agreement between public and private school teachers. In our interviews we found that 30% of private school teachers believed parents look for opportunities for parental involvement in a school compared with 8% of public school teachers.

**Table 5. Parental Involvement: Category Selected by Private Choice School and Public School Teachers and Administrators in Cleveland and Milwaukee.**

	Private Choice School Teacher (n=44) School Administrator (n=14)	Public School Teacher (n=48) School Administrator (n=11)
Teacher	30%	8%
School Administrator	7%	9%

Many advocates of school choice believe that the act of providing parents with a choice will increase their involvement. The data from this study do not support this. Most parents do not look for opportunities to be involved with the school. The truth is many schools that participate in school choice in Cleveland and Milwaukee require that parents commit to being involved with on-site activities at the school as a condition of admission. In seven of the ten private choice schools where we conducted our interviews, parents were either required to volunteer time in the school or were given a proportionate reduction in tuition costs for the hours they volunteer in the school (see Table 6).

**Table 6. Parental Involvement Requirements**

Name of School	Requirement
Bruce Guadalupe Community School (Milwaukee)	30 Hours of Volunteer Time
Harambee Community School (Milwaukee)	Attend Monthly Parent Meetings
Hope Central Academy (Cleveland)	Tuition Reduction
Hope Ohio City Academy (Cleveland) <sup>4</sup>	Tuition Reduction
Learning Enterprise Institute (Milwaukee)	None
Mt. Pleasant Christian School (Cleveland) <sup>5</sup>	Contractual Obligation - Unspecified
Saint Adalbert (Cleveland)	None
Saint Thomas Aquinas (Cleveland)	None
Urban Day School (Milwaukee)	20 Hours of Volunteer Time
Woodlands School (Milwaukee)	Attend Parent Teacher Conferences and 15 Hours of Volunteer Time

The amount of on-site time varies from a minimum of attending parent teacher conferences to a maximum of 30 volunteer hours a year. As one administrator at a private school stated, “We require that parents sign a straight-forward pledge sheet that requires so many hours of volunteer time. In the past some families have been chronic about not contributing. They have been and will be asked to leave the school.” Some schools will fine a parent if they miss required

meetings. As one parent indicated, “At this school, parents must attend an all-parent meeting or pay \$10, or the child will be suspended. The student’s report card shows a grade for parental involvement. All of my grades are pretty low. The school has been forcing me to improve in this area and I think this is a positive thing.” Other schools encourage involvement by having parents sign a contract upon admission to the school. These schools feel involvement is very important but do not designate a specified amount of time.

The taxpayers we surveyed are quite supportive of allowing private schools that participate in choice to have parental involvement requirements. We found that two-thirds of those surveyed in Ohio and Wisconsin believe that private schools participating in a choice program should be allowed to require parents to work as volunteers in the school. Support for parental involvement held regardless of one’s support for school choice.

**Table 7. Percent of Taxpayers Surveyed Who Agree with Following Statement.**

<b>“Private Schools that Participate in a Choice Program Should be Allowed to Require Parents to Work as Volunteers in the School.”</b>
65.6%

Administrators involved in the day-to-day operation of a school take a realistic view of parental involvement. Many administrators believe that parental involvement is an important factor in student achievement and they do not sit back and hope that the act of choosing will guarantee that parents will become involved. For this reason many private choice schools require parental involvement as a condition of admission. Our data indicated that there is strong public support for allowing participating choice schools to require that parents volunteer time in the school. Taken together these findings bring into question the issue of parental involvement for traditional public schools.

**Parental Involvement and Traditional Public Schools**

Public school parents were as likely as private school parents to demonstrate only a minimal interest in parental involvement issues when choosing a school (Table 4). Unlike private choice schools, the public schools these children attend do not have requirements for parental involvement. Of the ten public schools where we conducted our interviews, most of the administrators believed parental involvement was related to academic achievement, but all felt that as a public school they could not require this involvement. The common phrase made by public school administrators is best reflected in the following statement, “We encourage parents to come to the school and let them know they are always welcome, but we are a public school and there can’t be any requirements that they be involved.”

There are a few select public schools in both Cleveland and Milwaukee that are going beyond encouragement and beginning to require some types of parental involvement as an admissions requirement. For example, as one administrator of a magnet school in Cleveland indicated, “Parents receive a brochure if they are interested in this school. This brochure tells how this school

is different from other public schools. Parents are encouraged to participate in tutoring, grading or volunteering with fundraisers.”

Parents generally view this emphasis on involvement in a positive light. One parent whose child attended this school stated, “It is very important that parents understand that they are being asked to contribute to this school. I think parents who are not able to meet the expectations of the school should choose another school.” This view was reflected by another parent whose child attended this school, “Parents should know how much involvement the school expects from them in order to meet the requirements.”

Nonetheless, parental involvement requirements can result in the inability of students to be admitted to a public school. In Milwaukee, three popular high schools were granted authority to establish admissions requirements for incoming students for the 1998-1999 school year. One of these high schools required that parents who were interested in sending their children to the school must attend an informational meeting as one condition of admission. As one parent we interviewed commented, “My oldest daughter went to this high school. I wanted my younger daughter to go there as well, but I missed some required meeting, so she was assigned to a different high school. I am planning on seeing if I can get her into that high school for her sophomore year.”<sup>6</sup>

Parental involvement requirements produce a trade-off. For involved parents, their participation should result in higher achievement. On the other hand, parents who are unable or unwilling to be involved are forced to limit their choice in schools to those schools that do not require parental involvement. In our desire to expand choice and encourage parental involvement we must examine these two opposing results.

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## **Conclusion**

This examination of the issue of parental involvement in public and private choice schools in Cleveland and Milwaukee indicated that the act of providing a choice does not automatically correlate with more on-site parental involvement. Our findings show that most parents do not look for opportunities to be involved when choosing a school. Our findings also point out that in the sample of private choice schools we examined, the majority of these schools compensate by requiring, as a condition of admission, that parents be involved with their children’s school. If research continues to demonstrate that on-site involvement is positively related to academic achievement, this finding should not be overlooked. Controlling for all other factors, a school that can require that parents volunteer time should have better student achievement than a school that cannot.

There is public support in Ohio and Wisconsin for allowing private schools that participate in choice to require parental involvement with a school. Our study does not reveal whether this support would hold for traditional public schools. Nonetheless, it is important that policymakers consider allowing parental participation requirements for public schools. First, parental involvement has been found to be positively related to achievement. Second, traditional public schools could be at a long-term disadvantage if they are unable to require parental involvement. Yet, as we found there may be some unintended consequences to allowing public schools to require

parental involvement. Just as with private schools, a parental involvement requirement by public schools can result in denying admission to students. It is important that policymakers weigh the positive benefits of parental involvement with the potential negative consequences of denying admission to some students. If policymakers allow this requirement, they may reward students whose parents participate and punish those whose parents do not.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For more details on the methodology and further information on the research in Cleveland and Milwaukee, see Public Policy Forum Report, *Choice School Accountability: A Consensus of Views in Ohio and Wisconsin*, February, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Please contact the author for further information on how the schools were selected. The public schools in Milwaukee are: 53<sup>rd</sup> St. Elementary, Curtin Elementary, Juneau High School, Maryland Avenue Elementary and Parkview Elementary. The five private choice schools in Milwaukee are: Bruce Guadalupe Harambee, Learning Enterprise Institute of Wisconsin, Urban Day and Woodlands Elementary. The five Cleveland public schools are: Anton Grdina Elementary, Central Middle School, Newton D. Baker, South High School and Tremont Elementary. The Cleveland private choice schools are: Hope Central Academy, Hope Ohio City Academy, Mt. Pleasant Elementary, Saint Adalbert, and Saint Thomas/Saint Phillip. We contacted the administrators and five teachers affiliated with each of these schools. We also targeted ten parent interviews from each school.

<sup>3</sup> The population estimates represent the latest available estimates from the census general population survey. We feel that the sample population is representative of the estimated population in all cases except for African Americans in Wisconsin. For this reason, we ran the analyses by weighting the African Americans in Wisconsin to represent the population. This did not change the frequencies in most cases. Where it did change, the effect was less than 0.1%. Because the results were not affected we chose to use the unweighted frequencies in all of the tables.

<sup>4</sup> Hope Ohio City Academy is now known as Hope Tremont Academy.

<sup>5</sup> Mt. Pleasant Christian School is no longer in existence.

<sup>6</sup> This interview, along with four others was conducted after completion of the original 153 parent interviews in order to gauge some reaction to this newly created admissions requirements at these three Milwaukee High Schools.