

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS SCDP REPORT 0901

FAMILY REFLECTIONS
ON THE
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM



Thomas Stewart, Ph.D.

Patrick Wolf, Ph.D.

Stephen Q. Cornman, Esq., MPA

Kenann McKenzie-Thompson, M.Ed.

Jonathan Butcher

Family Reflections on the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program

Final Summary Report

Introduction

On January 23, 2004, President Bush signed the District of Columbia School Choice Incentive Act into law. This landmark piece of legislation included \$14 million in funding for what would come to be called the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP). The OSP is the first federally funded K-12 scholarship program in the country. Eligible applicants were chosen by lottery to receive annual scholarships valued at up to \$7,500 per year.

Families of students who receive a scholarship can possibly send their children to the District of Columbia private school of their choosing at public expense. The OSP is managed by the Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF), a non-profit organization in the District of Columbia, under contract with the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of the Mayor of the District of Columbia.

In an attempt to chronicle the real-life experiences of OSP families, the School Choice Demonstration Project (SCDP) sought and received support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation for a qualitative study of the Program. Over the last four years, the SCDP research team has engaged a randomly selected group of families in a series of focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The families in the study all entered the Program in 2004 (Cohort 1) or 2005 (Cohort 2). The purpose of this report, fourth and final in a series, is to document the experiences of a small group of families and illuminate those aspects of their experiences that can help interested stakeholders improve the OSP or inform other attempts to replicate this model.

We acknowledge the limitations of such qualitative research. Participating families are self-selected in a number of ways, including their desire to apply for an Opportunity Scholarship and their willingness to discuss their experiences in a public group setting. The statements and experiences of the families



in this study are not necessarily representative of all OSP families or the broader population of low-income urban parents and students in the District of Columbia. The experiences

and opinions that the participants shared with us were not necessarily caused by their participation in the OSP; however, their stories are a lens through which we can glimpse and

likely gain a better understanding of what it has been like for this group of new school consumers in the District of Columbia.

Key Findings

The findings and observations presented here are a summary of the comprehensive Fourth Year Report available at “<http://www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP.html>”. The specific findings presented here were selected primarily because they were mentioned frequently and persistently by study participants. Some of the findings reflect positively on the OSP. Other findings presented here indicate the shortcomings and limitations of the Program and the schools. As a whole, they represent the experience of inner-city parents seeking a better educational opportunity for their children.

Throughout the study, focus groups were used as the primary method for gathering information. During the fourth year, semi-structured personal interviews and interactive polling devices were also used. After the information was collected, the research team analyzed data and sorted the findings into seven categories. Within each category, a

brief review of the literature or a framework for thinking about the topic is offered. This commentary is followed by a summary of the key findings and supporting evidence.

What Families Look for in Schools

The specific school preferences that choosing parents have is central to the debate about the desirability of school choice programs. If parents do not really know what to look for in a school, or if they seek objectionable conditions such as racial uniformity, then their educational choices will be unlikely to result in educational benefits for their child or society in general. If parents have an eye for school quality, then parental school choice is likely to benefit their children.

In the first year of focus groups, parents listed a variety of reasons for their school choices, the most common being smaller class sizes, school safety, and a religious or

values-based environment. Parents also sought a more rigorous academic curriculum, the opportunity to learn foreign languages, racial diversity, and close proximity to their home.

“The curriculum is very different and the language is very different. When I looked at the difference and I said to them that this school that they’re going to is preparing them to go to college.” (Cohort 1 Middle School Parent)

“Actually, I wanted my child to be in a school setting where it has racial diversity. I didn’t want it to be where she would just see her color.”

(Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent)

The information gathered from the second year interviews and focus groups indicated that parents had a strong preference for academic quality, with a diverse set of secondary preferences centered on safety, order and discipline, as well as convenience. Many parents of elementary, middle and high school students responded throughout the

four years that small classes were the first characteristic they were seeking. The parents were also interested in the qualifications of the teachers in these smaller classrooms and sought information pertaining to school-level student achievement.

By the third year of focus groups, safety was less of a priority for both cohorts. When asked to explain why they now rated safety as a less important issue, three years later, several parents provided reasons that were generally captured by this respondent's comment:

“Well I think once you pull your children out of public schools and you get comfortable with the private atmosphere, safety becomes no longer an issue because they are safe. So then you can focus on what is important and that is the curriculum.” (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent, Spring 2007)

Not all parents have changed their position on safety. This Cohort 2 parent captured the general attitude of some other parents that enhanced school safety was and remains a vital reason for their participation in the OSP:

“I don't have to worry about him being...hit by somebody else fighting or throwing kids...I don't have to worry about the fighting in the school. They might have one or two

little misunderstandings but it's not an everyday occurrence like it was at [his previous public school]. At [his previous public school] they fought every day -- it's always commotion -- so safety is still number one for me.”

(Cohort 1 High School Parent, Spring 2007)

A few parents indicated that teacher's attitude is also important. One parent noted:

I look at the curriculum, the setting, the classroom size, the environment, the teachers and they don't give you their entire background and history of the teachers. But I wanna know that they're personable, they're loving, they'll tend to the children's needs on all levels. Pretty much overall they're for the children, the children are number one, and will work, will provide services for the children in the educational field, working with children. (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent, Spring, 2008)

The Importance of Information

Information is central to consumer activity in any context. Shoppers rely on the information on clothing labels to assess the fit and quality of an outfit, and the information on packaging to determine the likely taste and nutritional value of the food that they buy. Magazines such as Consumer



Reports and countless Internet sites provide guidance and comprehensive consumer information to eager subscribers and web-surfers. There is general agreement that informed consumers help to make markets work properly in education as in all other areas of the economy.

The three most commonly discussed sources of consumer information about schools are information centers and guides, social networks, and personal site visits.

Although research has been unable to pinpoint exactly how much information is necessary to be an effective educational consumer, there is general agreement that

more is better. Families that are able to gather information from multiple sources and visit several different schools likely will be able to separate the more reliable from the less helpful information and draw accurate contrasts between various educational suppliers, services and products.

In the beginning stages of the OSP, quality and accurate information about the Program and the participating schools emerged as an extremely important point of discussion within the focus groups. Parents relied on a variety of information sources including the WSF, private and public schools, other parents (i.e. their social networks), and prior knowledge. Most parents in the first year focus groups found the information packets provided by the WSF, especially the directory on participating schools, to be useful in finding a school. They were also generally impressed with the frequency of communication from the WSF.

“The level of communication [from the Washington Scholarship Fund], letters, phone calls, follow-up letters, follow-up phone calls...I mean sometimes we are busy and we need that.”

(Cohort 1 High School Parent)



An Example of a Dissatisfied Chooser

Paula is a native of Washington, D.C. who graduated from the public school system. She describes school as one of her best experiences in life. She has one child in the OSP. When asked how she would compare her parenting style to that of her parents, she explains that, like her parents, she stresses the importance and seriousness of education to her children.

She has become increasingly concerned about the quality of teachers at her child's school. She is most concerned about the fact that perhaps her child's school is not equipped to handle the increased number of OSP students. Though she felt the school was not prepared, she kept her child in private school primarily to ensure her safety. In addition to her disappointment with the quality of the teachers at her child's school, she was surprised that the class size was no different than the public school they left. Furthermore, she was disgruntled because she felt she was paying for services the school advertised, such as tutoring, which were not being offered.

While she is considering enrolling her child in a public charter school, she remains very concerned about safety. Paula's advice to parents who are attending or are considering attending private schools is to conduct surprise or unannounced visits to make sure that the schools are really offering what they advertised. She believes the Program is most beneficial if students enroll in elementary school, as opposed to middle and high school. Her greatest concern could be best addressed by establishing a monitoring system to ensure that private schools that participate in OSP have qualified teachers and core features of the Program they advertise to parents.

The evidence from the second year focus groups and interviews revealed that access to “reliable information” is one of the most consistent needs expressed by parents of elementary, middle, and high school students during both the first and second year of the OSP. In fact, families appeared to increasingly demand and appreciate the importance of extensive and reliable information about schools as they progressed into their OSP experience.

Since the beginning of the OSP, Hispanic families consistently placed a higher premium on site visits and conversations with school-based personnel than have other segments of OSP families, possibly due to wider

language and cultural gaps between home and school.

When asked to reflect upon the importance of various forms of information they were exposed to over three or four years they were in the OSP, parents generally concluded that there is no substitute for face-to-face communications with Program and school personnel as well as other parents (Exhibit 1). School visits and information sessions with WSF were the two sources of information cited as most valuable to parents, followed by advice from other parents and the school fair. (The importance of information was emphasized in greater detail during the personal interviews.)

However, several parents expressed that their initial positive impressions of the schools they chose were inconsistent with actual experiences:

“They always seemed like they’re [good schools] with their open house but after you get your child there it’s not the same. Everything is just totally different, just totally different.” (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent, Spring 2007)

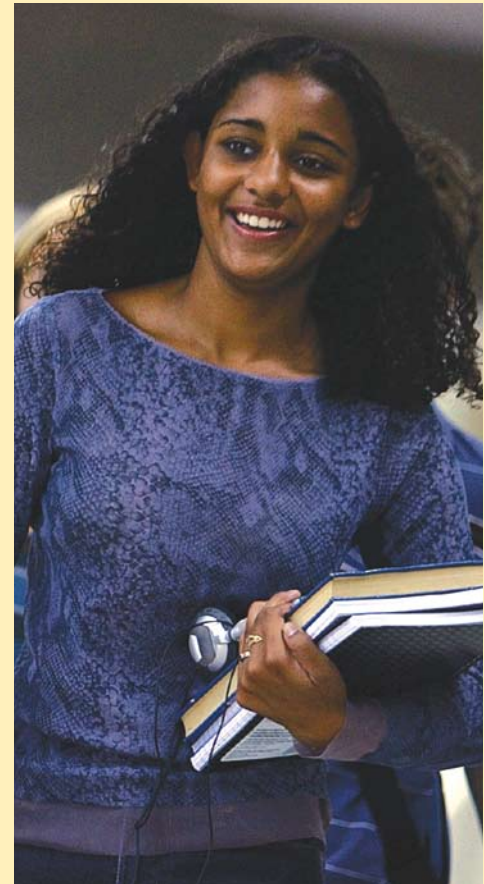
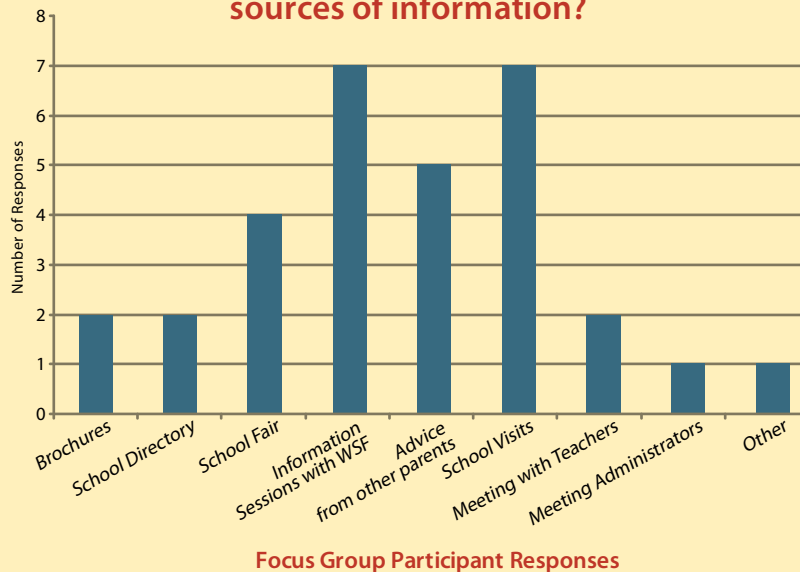
Formal sources of information, such as brochures and the school directory, together were only cited as the most helpful by four of the responding parents. The content of the directory was discussed by a few parents in personal interviews.

I felt that the scholarship program... They need to focus more on what they [participating schools] are writing in that pamphlet, in that directory to tell you, to describe the school to each one of the parents. When they describe their schools, make that description of everything that the kids will be having in that particular school, they need to go visit that school and make sure that what they’re saying is what they’re offering, what they do have, and actually see it, go there. Go during the time of day that it should be given to make sure that it is being done. (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent Who Withdrew from the OSP, Spring 2008)



Exhibit 1

In retrospect, what were the most helpful sources of information?



The subgroup of parents who withdrew from the Program presented the most distinctive pattern of responses. These former scholarship users were more likely than parents in the other subgroups to list the school visits as the most helpful and none of them cited individual communications with other parents, school personnel, or WSF as most helpful in their school choice process.

Although some segments of parents—most notably the middle school families—initially considered the school directory to be a very important source of information, all parent groups later listed school visits and direct communications with administrators, teachers, and other parents as the most valuable sources of information about schools. The reader should remember that the families here have the benefit of

hindsight. The descriptive summary information such as school directories and brochures may be especially important to new school choosers who have less access information about schools and whose existing social networks are a limited resource. Once they gain some experience with school choice, they can tap into other information through first-hand school visits, meetings with school personnel, and informal parent networks.

Family Transition to the New School Environment

For parents who previously sent their children to neighborhood public schools, the new environment of private schools can represent a significant change. Transferring away from friends at a familiar school to a new school with different peers and a dissimilar educational environment, which might include different sets of expectations, is likely to be challenging for students, at least initially. Adjusting to a new private school environment might be especially difficult for older students who are used to the conditions in their public school.

We might reasonably expect that the different expectations and requirements in the private school sector will require some measure of adjustment for parents and educators as well as students. Although previous research on “school choice adjustment” is quite sparse, the few studies that exist suggest that the mutual adjustment of families to schools and schools to families is more likely to be successful the longer choice students remain in a school.

The first year focus groups revealed that many parents faced significant challenges with the transition, including juggling work and family schedules to help their children with homework, participating in school activities, meeting additional financial

obligations, developing a relationship with teachers, and overcoming language and cultural challenges. In the first year many parents felt that the curriculum in their children’s new schools was more challenging, but that, in general, the increased demands were a good thing.

“The teacher is excellent, the intensity of the curriculum they have at her school is excellent; they have these pre-K kids doing fractions.” (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent, Spring 2005)

“It was a lot of work. I was afraid that with so many things to do she would get sick.” (Cohort 1 Hispanic Parent, Spring 2005)

Although some parents recognized that their children might experience a difficult adjustment period, the majority of parents felt that overall standards should not be lowered to accommodate OSP students. As one parent noted:

“Our kids need to come up, we don’t need to bring our standards down.”

(Cohort 1 High School Parent, Spring 2005)

In contrast to the reports in our first-year study that several OSP parents and students felt “singled out,” the parents in both Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 unanimously reported feeling very comfortable in their new schools by the second year of the OSP. In the third year of focus groups, a few



isolated cases of the stigmatization of OSP students were reported. Generally speaking, there was very little to report on this matter by the end of the third year.

In order to make a smooth transition into the OSP a few parents offered recommendations that focused on being involved with their child's life at school.

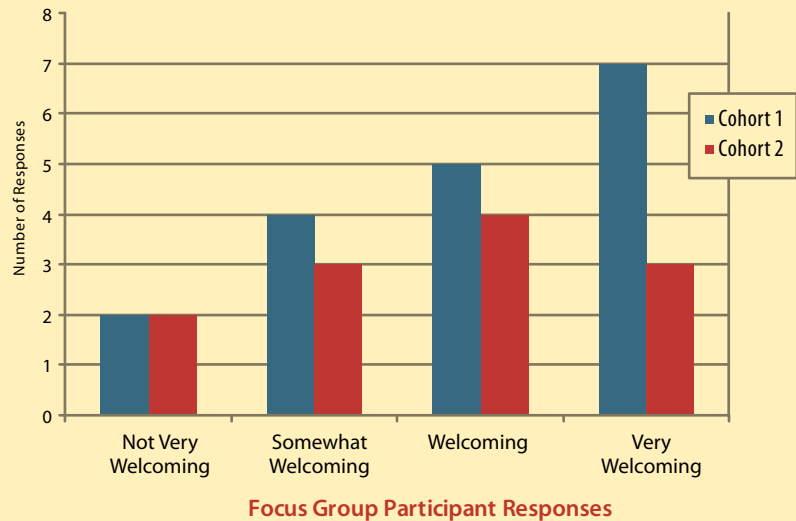
I would just tell them to just make sure that they go, and be a part of it, be a part of the solution, be a part of the school, do everything that you can possibly to find out what is going on in your child's life at school. And listen to your child, listen to what they come home and tell you...

(Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent Who Withdrew from the OSP, personal interview Spring 2008)

In order for OSP families to benefit from their new school communities, they need to be welcomed into them. With the assistance of interactive polling technology, in our fourth year of data collection, we asked parents several questions regarding the extent to which they felt welcomed by key members of their private school community. Most of the respondents, 19 of the 30 who answered the question, said that other parents at their new school were either very welcoming or at least welcoming

Exhibit 2

How welcoming were parents of other students when you first started in the program?



during their first year of the participation in the Program.

The general “warm welcome” reported by OSP families masked some important variations by cohort. Cohort 1 parents described receiving a somewhat warmer welcome than did Cohort 2 parents (Exhibit 2). This difference could be explained in part by the fact that many participating OSP schools were under-enrolled at the time that the Program was launched and the parents of existing students were excited about the additional financial resources associated with OSP families. When Cohort 2 joined the Program a year

later, many participating schools reached or exceeded their capacity for OSP students and some of the attractiveness of the Program may have worn-off.

Parents were then asked to consider how welcoming other parents from their new schools are toward them now. Their responses suggest that other parents became more welcoming of the OSP families over time. Half of the 30 respondents said that other parents are now very welcoming of their family and only one respondent said that the school community remains not very welcoming.

How do Parents Assess Student Development and Progress

The Source of Parent Satisfaction

How satisfied are OSP parents with the schools their children now attend? Virtually every school choice program evaluated to date has reported very high levels of parental satisfaction with choice schools, especially in the initial year of their experiences with choice. The literature suggests that satisfaction with the new schools of choice may be higher initially either because the dissatisfaction with their previous schools is freshest at that point, or because the charm of the new schools has a tendency to wear off somewhat over time, particularly as parents become more aware of the shortcomings in their schools of choice. Satisfaction with choice schools also may vary by the level of schooling, as students are more likely to drop out of school choice programs when transitioning from middle to high school.

The true source of parental satisfaction with school choice must be specified in order to clearly understand how well choice is operating. Parental satisfaction with a school choice program, and the overall opportunity to choose their children's schools, is one thing. Parental satisfaction with a particular school chosen can be another matter. Presumably, if parents are highly satisfied with the school they have chosen, they also are more likely to be satisfied with the program that permitted them to exercise that choice. However, parents who are dissatisfied with the school they chose for their children still might be satisfied with the school choice Program that gave them access to other school options.

As with other choice programs, parents and students participating in the OSP expressed high levels of satisfaction with both their schools and the Program during the inaugural year. The source of their satisfaction stemmed from what parents and

students perceived as greater parental involvement in their child's education, improved safety and stricter discipline, smaller classes, religious-based instruction, enhanced curriculum, and effective support services such as tutoring and mentoring.

One first year parent expressed the general sentiment of that cohort when she described her most memorable experience in the Program:

"When my son dressed in that uniform with that green blazer, the white shirt, tie, gray trousers and he looked like a gentleman and a scholar and he had his hair cut and his glasses and he was just grinning from ear to ear that he was going to be a part of that [new school culture] and he went to school that day and he was excited about going to school." (Cohort 1 High School Parent, Spring 2005)

In the second year of focus groups most parents cited noticeable changes in their children's attitudes about learning as the main source of their satisfaction. They often noted an improved disposition toward school and more productive homework and other learning habits. One parent expressed her satisfaction in the following words:

I was looking for a different environment for him. My thing was, if he will follow Sally and Sally [is] not into her work, [in private school] he will follow John who gets better grades and that's exactly what's happening now. (Cohort 2 Middle School Parent, Spring 2006)

The majority of Hispanic parents stated their children are more motivated, focused on what they want, and are striving for improved grades. The Hispanic parents' high level of

satisfaction also appears to stem from the fact that several private schools participating in the OSP are more religiously oriented. The Hispanic parents were particularly pleased with the way the schools their children are attending provide incentives for good behavior and academic improvement.

Scholarship students who participated in the focus groups in the first and second years were generally satisfied with many aspects of their new schools. They noted in particular the greater level of individual attention in the smaller classes, the content of the curriculum, and religious instruction. They also expressed a

belief that they would have more social and economic opportunities as a result of participating in the Program. Generally speaking, students also felt more comfortable with the improved safety in their schools.

Perhaps the single most consistent response voiced in the focus groups was the high levels of satisfaction reported by each subgroup and cohort. Even in situations where parents complained or expressed disappointment with some aspect of their experience (resulting in some families withdrawing from the OSP), they still gave the Program high marks. Their satisfaction seems to stem from at least three major factors. First, they report that their children are doing well, for example:

“I believe, if she wasn’t in private school and if she hadn’t learned... they really excel at this program, cause I know for a fact they would never have received this kind of education at a public school...I listen to them when they talk, and what they are saying, and they articulate better than I do, and I know it’s because of the school, and I like that about them, and I’m proud of them.” (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent, Spring 2008)

Second, aside from a few minor administrative challenges in the first and second years of the Program, the parents give the Washington



Scholarship Fund (WSF) a lot of credit for the way the OSP has been managed, and the care and attention they have received from WSF staff. Last and perhaps most important, many of them expressed appreciation for the fact that they made the choice. One parent expressed these views:

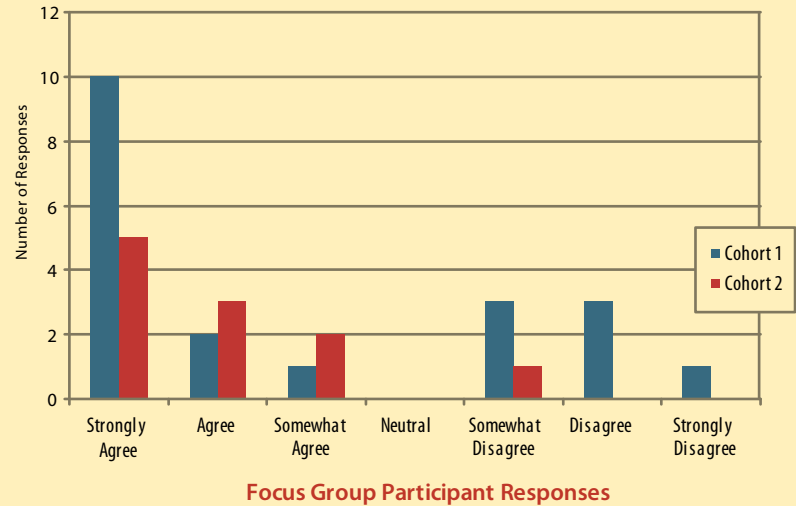
[The OSP] gives me the choice to, freedom to attend other schools than DC public schools...I'm not really badgering or bashing the system, but right now, well at the time, I just didn't feel that I wanted to put him in DC public school and I had the opportunity to take one of the scholarships, so therefore, I can afford it and I'm glad that I did do that. (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent, Spring 2008)

Even in situations where the parents transferred their children to another school within the Program or out of the Program altogether, they were most likely to report that they could have done more to select an appropriate school versus complaining that a particular school had not met their expectations.

To further explore this topic, the research team administered a series of polling questions. These questions allowed the respondents to provide additional insights into their previous responses about satisfaction. A total of 23 of the 31 respondents agreed with the

Exhibit 3

My family is very satisfied with the OSP



statement – “my family is very satisfied with the OSP” (Exhibit 3); 15 of them strongly agreed with the statement. Eight (8) respondents



disagreed with the statement, and one of them did so strongly.

Although levels of satisfaction with the OSP were high among both cohorts, the polling results suggest that satisfaction was generally higher among Cohort 2 parents compared to those in Cohort 1. The difference may be explained in part by the truncated implementation schedule for the first year of the OSP. In the second year, Cohort 2 families had more time to learn about the Program, apply, and search for placements in schools. Moreover, with a year of implementation experience under its belt, the Washington Scholarship Fund most likely did a better job of delivering the OSP to Cohort 2 families compared to those in Cohort 1.

From a subgroup perspective, some parents were more satisfied with the OSP than other subgroups. For instance, the parents of elementary school students expressed the most consistently high levels of satisfaction with the Program. Open seats were plentiful at the elementary school level throughout the implementation of the OSP, giving parents with elementary school age students a variety of school choices, many of which were convenient to their neighborhood.

Spanish-speaking parents also were highly satisfied with the Program. Middle and high school parents tended to be satisfied with the OSP, but less so compared to the elementary and Spanish speaking respondents. As noted earlier in this report, middle and high school students had comparatively few schooling options and available seats, which may have forced some families to make tradeoffs among fewer school options.

Finally, parents who withdrew from the OSP expressed the lowest level of satisfaction with the Program. Of the four parents who withdrew from the OSP and responded to the polling question, one parent selected “somewhat agree” and two other parents choose “disagree,” with one responding “strongly disagree.”

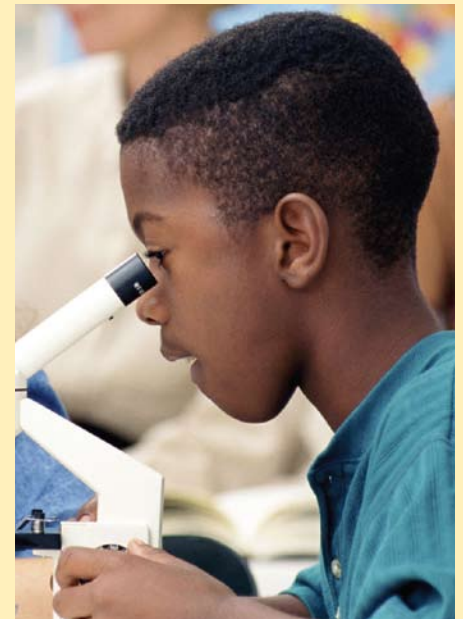
Focus Groups as an Outlet for Expression

In this section, we attempt to capture the level of willingness of OSP parents to engage or join other members of the school community in activities that communicate their disposition about the Program. Since the OSP is up for reauthorization in 2009, their willingness (or lack thereof) to more publicly and directly engage Congress, the new President, a relatively new mayor and other influential stakeholders could strongly influence the fate of the Program.

Lower-income and working class urban individuals and families traditionally have low rates of political activism. In some respects this is understandable, as such groups tend to face major life challenges and experiences that diminish their willingness and ability to be actively involved in the broader community. Though perhaps understandable, this lack of political activism

is regrettable because it limits the ability of such groups to shape public policy in ways that serve their interests. Having participated in the OSP over the past three or four years, and having expressed high levels of satisfaction with the Program, are OSP parents sufficiently motivated to take action in defense of the Program’s continuation?

In year 3 of the data collection, we first asked parents about their willingness to share their experiences with the OSP publicly and with decision-makers. Elementary school parents in both cohorts indicated that they would be active in making their voice heard on the pending reauthorization of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program. The parents in Cohort 1 were particularly enthusiastic about influencing OSP policy.

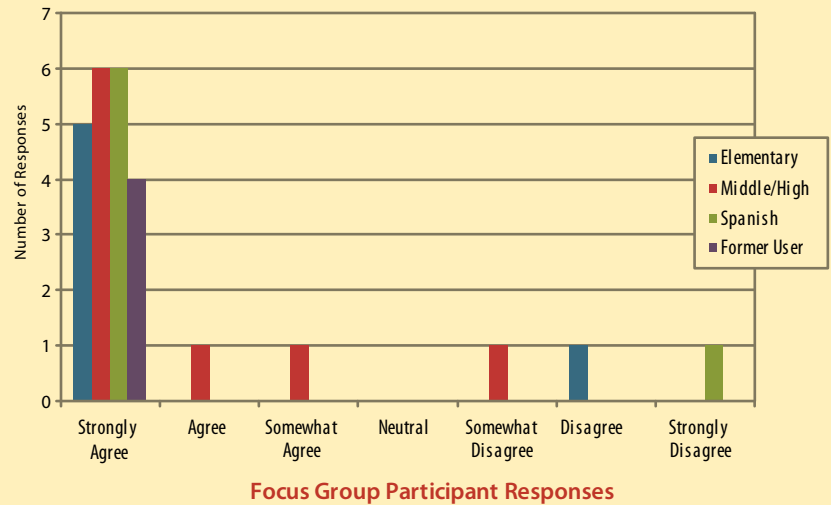


“We still need school choices for our children until things are better as far as the public school is concerned. So we’re going to have to lobby.” (Cohort 1 Elementary School Parent, Spring 2007)



Exhibit 4

The focus groups allowed my family to thoughtfully express our experiences with the OSP.



When asked what kinds of public expressions of support parents would be willing to make, most focus group participants said that they preferred to write letters and testify before Congress or the City Council rather than participate in other forms of political activity like lobbying and voting.

Finally, in this fourth year of data collection, parents provided feedback regarding the extent to which this qualitative research project might have served as a vehicle for them to share their experiences in constructive ways. Some parents seemed very reluctant to express their views directly to school officials, particularly if their comments might

be perceived as negative by teachers and administrators. Moreover, many of the families reported that they were not actively involved with a parent organization.

Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 parents, whose experiences with the Program differed in significant ways on other topics, equally viewed the focus group experience as highly valuable. The parents who withdrew their children from the Program, ironically, represented the subgroup that was most appreciative of the opportunity to share their experiences via the focus groups (Exhibit 4). All four of them who answered the question said they “strongly agreed” that the sessions allowed them to thoughtfully

express their opinions and experiences regarding the Program.

Throughout our study, it was common during and after the focus groups to witness parents exchanging comments and contact information with one another. Given the fact that most parents who participated in the study reported that they were not members of or involved with a parent organization, it seemed that the focus groups provided parents a rare opportunity to share and exchange information. It often appeared that the focus groups were a form of social networking for many study participants.

Parents' Suggestions for Improving the Program

Requesting feedback from customers encourages them to “voice” their concerns. Albert O. Hirschman, in his seminal work Exit, Voice, and Loyalty, maintains that customer voice can enable clients to improve the service that they are receiving without having to endure the burdens of exiting a program, company or relationship for another one. Presumably, organizational managers will seek to address the voiced complaints of customers in order to dissuade them from exiting the organization and taking customer resources with them. The threat of customer exit likely renders their voice more influential in shaping the actions of management.

In the context of the OSP, participants had various potential opportunities to communicate their preferences through both exit and voice. Simply by taking the time and effort to apply for an Opportunity Scholarship, participating families revealed an interest in and willingness to explore educational options beyond the District of Columbia public and public charter school systems – i.e. to employ an educational “exit” option. Having used the OSP to enroll their children in a specific school of choice, they then were in a position to direct their voice toward improving the education the school was providing to their children. If that school option failed to meet their expectations or was lacking in any way, they could transfer to a different participating school. OSP families had the ability to voice concerns about the Program itself to the Washington Scholarship Fund and



A Successful Chooser

Fatima is a single mother who is a first generation U.S. citizen. She identifies herself as a Muslim and was born in an East African country. She has four children, and one of her daughters is attending a private middle school as part of the OSP. She notes that her primary reasons for pursuing the scholarship and her vision for her daughter is that she learn multiple languages, specifically Arabic.

Unlike the role she now plays, it is customary in Fatima’s native country for the men to oversee and manage the children’s education. She describes her education in Africa as “strict” yet she really benefitted from learning several languages. When asked to explain why she selected a particular school, she said: “This was a school that really had a unique program. They had dual language and for me I was very, very interested because, you know coming from Africa, we speak many languages.”

As a result of her personal experiences as a student, she strongly believes that children have the right to feel safe and nurtured in school, public or private. When asked how her daughter is doing now, she explained: “She can read in Arabic like someone who has been learning all their life.” She feels strongly that ending the Program would be a “disaster for the children.” Her support for the Program is best reflected by the fact that she has referred at least three families whose children are now enrolled in the OSP.

leave the OSP if the Program did not satisfy their needs. Finally, the participants in our focus groups were provided the opportunity to voice their concerns about the Program to us and, through our reports, to the broader public.

Based on the focus group feedback from parents in general and specifically the recommendations they made pertaining to improving financial policies and procedures, many participating schools addressed and improved the quality of their interactions with participating families.

Policy makers were also very responsive to one of the parents' most pressing concerns -- that the



eligibility requirements be changed to address their fears of “earning out” of the Program. In December of 2006, Congress amended the DC Choice Incentive Act to increase the continuing eligibility requirements from 200 percent of the poverty line to 300 percent of the poverty line for families who were already enrolled in the Program as of the 2004-05 or 2005-06 school year.

However, two concerns that were frequently expressed by the parents were not addressed. First, parents repeatedly requested an independent entity to evaluate and monitor the schools. In addition, some parents hoped that this entity would hold participating schools accountable for delivering the services and programs they advertised.

One parent who left the program indicated:

If Washington Scholarship Fund [the program administrator] better investigates participating schools and continues to monitor them, there will be less disappointment.

(Cohort 2 Middle School Parent, Spring 2008)

Secondly, they expressed a strong desire for policies that would open up more slots, particularly among high schools, in a greater variety of participating schools. One parent remarked:

“Only problem I had was with this difficulty in finding a school once she’s in high school – if I put her in the scholarship program in high school. They didn’t really offer too many choices to go to. You really wouldn’t have a choice in high school. And then we’re having to see if pretty much we can deal with that.”

(Cohort 2 Middle School Parent, Spring 2008)

This general sentiment is reflected in the following exchange between two parents:

Parent 1: *I just simply want to say that is probably what I’m dissatisfied with most. Once you become part of the scholarship fund they should allow you to stay a part of [OSP] so that you can see the success stories. ‘Cause what’s the point of getting your kids in here, they succeed, and then you have to pull them out?*

Parent 2: *Exactly.*

Parent 1: *[Students are] out of the school because you no longer are eligible or there’s no space. My daughter... I had to pull her out because of a space issue... it was a space thing – I couldn’t find a high school.*

Conclusion

Publicly funded school voucher programs remain highly controversial. One reason why the public remains conflicted about school vouchers is because few people think they know enough about such programs. This study illuminates several key aspects of the OSP from the unique perspectives of its participants. Their insights and experiences should inform the public discourse about the impact of education reform in general and the potential role of publicly funded vouchers more specifically.

Against this backdrop, the research team's greatest challenge required placing the families' individual or idiosyncratic experiences with the OSP into a broader context. Beyond the fact that all of the participating families lived in the District of Columbia and were at or below the poverty level when they applied for the OSP, there was considerable variation with regard to their family background and circumstances. In light of the range of circumstances surrounding the participants, the questions boiled down to: How does the study place the participants' experiences into a richer context and maintain the authenticity of their individual voices? And, from the vantage point of these families, what was learned that can inform

the debate about school vouchers as a means to address the needs of low income families?

By the end of the second year of data collection, it became very clear to us that the vast majority of the families were moving from a marginal role as passive recipients of school assignments to active participants in the school selection process in very practical ways. For example, they were being challenged to collect information about several schools;

review this information and use it to refine their choices; and eventually visit schools and engage teachers and administrators in a completely new fashion. This type of thinking and behavior is commonly associated with other big-ticket purchases like homes or cars. Yet, the average family in the OSP does not own a home or car and often has not acquired some of the transferable experiences and skills that are involved with these transactions.



This realization suggested that most parents were essentially moving from the margins to the center of their children’s academic development. Each family was expected to educate themselves about the pros and cons associated with their school options and to make a choice. Thus, we adopted a consumer framework for thinking about and describing their experiences with discrete aspects of the OSP. Many of our findings and observations were confirmed during our interviews with WSF staff members. The importance of information, the transition process and the true source of satisfaction are examples of findings brought to light by the families themselves in the course of our research and are worth briefly revisiting here.

A Closer Look at Information

The information gathering process presented the families with a unique dilemma. On one hand, most parents understood the need for and often requested as much information about schools as possible. On the other



hand, they often reported feeling overwhelmed by the responsibilities associated with assessing the validity and reliability of that information.

There is a critical need to distinguish between (1) access to information and (2) possessing the skills and competencies necessary to process that information and use it to make an informed school choice. Given that most OSP parents lacked experience with school choice, it should come as no surprise that they were most overwhelmed by the time and effort involved with school visits, teacher interviews and other more intimate aspects of selecting schools. Their repeated request for an independent entity to help them in these areas is a strong source of evidence about the challenge of exercising choice.

The staff at the WSF is mindful that many of the responsibilities that might be associated with an independent entity are beyond the scope of their administrative role. They reported that they often have a good sense of the “character and mission” of most of the participating schools, but they do not presume to know whether a school is a “good fit” for individual students and families. They strongly encourage parents to first visit any school they are considering, and suggest that they ask the school personnel certain questions, before formally enrolling their child. They believe that the final school choice decision must be made by the parents or families.

The Challenges Associated with the Transition

Many of the families experienced a transition from marginal and relatively inactive consumers of schools to individuals who were expected to play an active and central role in the selection process. The families made it abundantly clear that Program administrators, in this case the Washington Scholarship Fund, play an extremely important, if not indispensable, role in supporting their transition. In addition to the participants, the WSF reported that the families relied on them to provide a host of support services ranging from completing applications to securing tutors and more. In order to fully meet the needs of low income families that participate in future voucher programs, Program sponsors must be provided with or should be prepared to secure the resources necessary to help participating families adjust to the challenges they may experience moving from public to private schools.

The True Source of Satisfaction

Though parents have reported high levels of satisfaction each year, a burning question remains - What is the true source of their satisfaction with the Program? At this stage of the Program, it appears that parent

or family satisfaction stems more from the opportunity to participate in the Program than tangible academic or other outcomes. The parents repeatedly expressed that the scholarship represented an “opportunity” to pursue what they perceived were better schools or schools that were more conducive to providing the type of learning environment most appropriate for their children. Though empirical evidence of student academic and social gains resulting from the OSP is limited to date, most parents were confident that it was just a matter of time before their own child would demonstrate clear benefits from the Program. For now, they are pleased with what they perceive as improved attitudinal and behavioral changes.

The families with students in the upper grades may never truly know the full potential impact of the OSP. Only a modest number of school slots are available to OSP students in high school grades, and the majority of those slots are in a single participating private school. At the high school level, the OSP currently offers most parents merely a choice between their assigned public school and one specific private school, not the extensive and diverse set of school choices available to younger OSP students.

For families with children who began the Program in the early grades, the greatest concern or worry expressed

by these parents is the shortage of slots for participants at the upper grade levels. The WSF acknowledged that there is a dearth of high school slots and believes they have made every attempt to increase the number of options available to OSP families. However, short of allowing families to pursue high school options outside the District of Columbia, there are no other quick or immediate solutions to the shortage. It appears that the shortage of slots in private high schools is a citywide problem.

In closing, for the parents in our study, finding the right school appears to be an enterprise that transcends their children’s education. For most parents, it is an opportunity to lift the next generation of their family out of poverty. As many parents noted during the personal interviews, the scholarship represents an opportunity for their children to acquire the skill sets and benefit from the reputation they assume are fundamental to a quality private school experience. The significance of the OSP is reflected, in large part, by the sacrifices the parents reported they have made or might be willing to make to maintain their income or residential eligibility for the Program. The clearest message from the pioneering DC parents in this study is that, as long as limited quality school options exist within high poverty areas of America, there will be a need to provide low income families access to and support for pursuing nontraditional school options.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors gratefully appreciate the valuable assistance and support from the following contributors:

Jessica Boccardo

Lori Foster

Margaret Price

Phyllis Mittler Cornman

V.E. Grobes

Yosselyn Rodriguez

Marlo Crandall

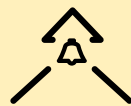
Colleen Morrison

Nicole Turner

We also benefitted immensely from the comments of Dr. Laura Hamilton, Dr. Jeffrey Henig and Dr. Jelani Mandara on a previous draft of this report. However, the claims, shortcomings and substantive limitations of the report are the sole responsibility of the authors.

This research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation through a grant to the University of Arkansas. The Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF) cooperated with the study. We thank all three organizations for their support and assistance but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation, the University, or the WSF.

Finally, we thank the families for their voluntary participation in this study. For participants in a longitudinal study, they were reliable, forthcoming, and instructive. We are honored that they would allow us to share their stories. Consistent with our promise to them, their names will remain confidential.



**SCHOOL CHOICE
DEMONSTRATION PROJECT**

School Choice Demonstration Project

Department of Education Reform

University of Arkansas

201 Graduate Education Building

Fayetteville, AR 72701

(479) 575-6345

www.uark.edu/ua/der/SCDP/Research.html