

RICE UNIVERSITY

**How Do High-Status Parents Choose Schools?  
Evidence from a Choice District**

by

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## ABSTRACT

### How Do High-Status Parents Choose Schools?

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One premise of contemporary school choice is that parents largely use academic quality indicators – loosely referred to as “accountability data” – to choose schools. This premise does not sufficiently account for the role of other mechanisms in parents’ decision-making that have been emphasized by other scholars, such as racial prejudice or network information. This project aims to highlight the mechanisms which are most important in the school choice narratives of high-status parents in a large, southern city. This population was sampled because of their above-average economic capital and social privilege and their capacity to access and use accountability data, which increase their ability to navigate school and residential markets. Participant data from in-depth, qualitative interviews highlight alternatives to the assumption that parents primarily or exclusively use accountability data to choose where to send their children to school. Specifically, parents’ color-blind “cultural logics,”<sup>1</sup> which include collective ideals, constructs, and stereotypes about race, emerge as key elements in parents’ school choices and how they later explain those choices. A discussion of the data will suggest that these collective mechanisms are meaningful for parent choice, and may have unintended consequences for school choice programs within racially diverse and segregated districts.

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<sup>1</sup> Fuller, Elmore, and Orfield 1996

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## INTRODUCTION

In an era of increasing school re-segregation, budget cuts, and student performance concerns, “school choice” is forwarded as a panacea for a host of issues within the education system. The term itself denotes the systematic availability of alternative school options outside of those assigned by neighborhood catchment area (i.e., location of family residence). Many assume that “choice” is inherently positive for both families and schools. However, the ways in which high-status parents choose, and the outcomes of their choices, are still poorly understood.

Many school choice programs claim a commitment to providing *equity of access* – namely, to high-quality programs, instruction, and resources. This is the specific goal of choice in the school district under study, and in districts elsewhere (see Jellison Holme, Carkhum, and Snodgrass Rangel 2012). However, persistent and widespread school re-segregation in the U.S., and differentiation of school quality by race, indicate that school choice may not be accomplishing this goal (Orfield, Kucsera, and Siegel-Hawley 2012). In many cases, school choice may actually allow (and even encourage) parents to make specific kinds of choices that perpetuate inequality within and between schools, rather than choices based on school performance, or “accountability,” alone. To more effectively analyze school choice and its outcomes, we must better understand the ways in which parents’ choices are made and what factors are most central to those choices. Specifically, we must better understand the ways in which accountability data are (or, as in the case of this study, are not) used, and how parent choice is ultimately shaped by collective racial logics and social expectations. Over time, this unintended school choice mechanism perpetually favors particular, high-performing, more privileged schools with fewer minority students, at the cost of less privileged schools. The

following critique of school choice will thus attempt to answer the following question: (1) *How do high-status parents choose schools and how do they explain their choices retrospectively?*

Since the advent of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2001, test-based accountability and school choice have transitioned from largely discrete strategies to reciprocal, “mutualistic” policies (Betebenner, Howe, and Foster 2005:1). The increasingly complementary relationship between these reforms has in many districts created an environment in which schools must compete for both funding and higher-performing students by meeting a series of yearly benchmarks (Jellison Holme, Carkhum, and Snodgrass Rangel 2012). The premise of this process, which I will call “accountability-based school choice,” is that parents use school quality indicators and testing data – either primarily or exclusively – to make their school choices, thus creating a school market. In contrast to this individualistic, accountability-driven framework,<sup>1</sup> I will argue that parents primarily use *color-blind “cultural logics”* (Fuller, Elmore, and Orfield 1996) which consist of collective ideals, constructs, and stereotypes about race, to inform their decisions.

Using selected passages from twenty-one in-depth qualitative interviews, I will outline the ways in which high-status parents in a southern city describe and retroactively explain their school choices, arguing that much of the decision-making process centers around information obtained from collective values and social expectations, rather than accountability data provided by the district. In other words, I will argue that parents choose schools in response to different stimuli than presumed under accountability-based school choice, and that their choices may contribute to the replication of school inequality and social disadvantage. I will further suggest

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<sup>1</sup> Several “camps” or theories of school choice exist, both in the scholarly literature and in the public discourse. Of greatest interest to this study is that which claims that school choice districts function essentially as a free markets, due to access to out-of-catchment schools and the wide availability of school quality indicators for individuals and families to use (see Olson Beal and Hendry 2012; Fuller, Elmore, and Orfield 1996:2-4).

that the process of parental decision-making can be construed as a type of color-blind cultural logic.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF SCHOOL CHOICE

The contemporary concept of U.S. school choice is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the early history of free public schooling, local control of public schools meant that students simply attended the school closest to their home. Public schools of the era were seen as an equalizing force in society and many students in the early U.S. had access to a public education, although nonwhites were not allowed an education until much later (Anderson 1988; Barnhouse Walters 2001; Miller-Kahn and Smith 2001). After slavery was dismantled in the U.S., Jim Crow laws and informal segregation perpetuated racial divides and public schools remained segregated by race until 1954, when the Supreme Court mandated that state-sponsored segregation in public schools was unconstitutional (*Brown v. Board of Education* 1954; Fuller, Elmore, and Orfield 1996:4-6). Through this ruling, the U.S. Supreme Court legally mandated desegregation of public schools by allowing black students to attend the “white schools” from which they had been previously excluded, and by implementing busing systems to provide students with needed transportation to those schools.

Following the Civil Rights Act of 1964, school choice was instituted as a formal integration tool to provide all students with equality of educational opportunity despite existing residential segregation (Fuller, Elmore, and Orfield 1996). More recent iterations have targeted a variety of other contemporary public education issues, including but not limited to segregation (Goodwin, Kemerer, Marinez, and Ruderman 1998; Schneider, Marschall, Roch, and Teske 1999; Ben-Porath 2009; Jennings 2010; Santos and Nordlund 2012). Despite the widespread institution of choice and other anti-segregation policies, some have noted recent increases in

public school re-segregation across the country and the widespread exit of white and affluent students from public districts (Clotfelter 2001; Saporito and Sohoni 2006; Tarasawa 2012; Orfield, Kucsera, and Siegel-Hawley 2012; Hannah-Jones 2014). (For an efficient and particularly compelling consideration of these re-segregation trends, see Breslow, Wexler, and Collins 2014.)

According to the specific premises of *accountability-based* school choice, contemporary forms of choice exist within market systems where accountability data are widely available, and parents are thought to mainly utilize available these data to choose schools (Olson Beal and Hendry 2012). Additionally, a choice environment is thought to provide better quality schools, as well as more equitable access to them (Blank, Levine, and Steel 1996). Fundamentally influenced by individualistic, Western ideals and market logic, these assumptions presume that parents' decisions within a school choice system are individual, inherently rational, and strongly influenced by the test-based (and other forms of) accountability within that system (Perry and Shotwell 2009; Betebenner, Howe, and Foster 2005).

The notion also assumes an unlimited supply of schools, between which competition is laissez-faire (Olson Beal and Hendry 2012). However, the truth is that schools can never be a true market, as the physical supply of schools is limited, competition between existing schools is directed by multiple factors other than accountability data, and no reasonable sort of equity or equilibrium has been attained (as shown by persistent racial segregation and racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps). Additionally, competitive accountability processes by which schools are rewarded for performance are sacrificial, as they allocate resources to higher-



performing schools with more privileged students, while concentrating disadvantage in already struggling schools (Jellison Holme, Carkhum, and Snodgrass Rangel 2012).<sup>2</sup>

Studies have even shown that even when a school is higher-performing than other schools (by local standards), if the minority student population at that school is above parents' desired threshold or "tipping point," parents tend to select other lower-performing schools with smaller minority student populations (Saporito and Lareau 1999; Tedin and Weiher 2004:1131). The question of where the tipping point lies for parents remains largely unanswered, although some have noted that some parents consider "one-third for each [racial/ethnic] group" to be "perfect integration" (Tedin and Weiher 2004:1130).

The city under study is home to a majority-minority district, with a student body that is less than ten percent white and over ninety percent minority. It is also one of the largest school choice districts in the nation, with over two-hundred thousand students enrolled. As in many other places, formal school choice in the district began in the 1970s as a racial integration measure. According to one respondent, a former district administrator, the institution of choice was an explicit attempt by district leadership to retain the city's quickly fleeing white students. Enrollment quotas were also enacted along the way, to ensure equitable enrollment by race and ethnicity and hinder school segregation. These quotas were altered in 1997, however, when two white students (and later a total of fourteen white and Asian families) sued the district for its racial/ethnic enrollment guidelines in Vanguard schools, which they claimed favored other racial

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<sup>2</sup> Kane and Staiger describe accountability as consisting of three elements: "testing students, public reporting of school performance, and rewards or sanctions based on some measure of school performance or improvement" (2002:92). Essentially, accountability refers to any system of checks and balances used by school districts to ensure (1) that schools are meeting a variety of state-determined benchmarks, and (2) that information on how schools perform is disseminated to stakeholders (i.e., parents), who supposedly use this information to make decisions about which schools are "good" (high-performing) and which are "bad" (low-performing). This system does not carefully account for the constraints on parent choice, and assumes that parents use the disseminated information for highly rational cost-benefit analyses (which is cause for some debate).

groups (Associated Press 1997). Following the suit, the district removed all forms of race-based admission, creating conditions under which school segregation would eventually reemerge.<sup>3</sup>

Choice experiments across the country generally allow parents (rather than the government) the authority to assign children to schools, and additionally provide a wider variety of schools than is generally available (Fuller, Elmore, and Orfield 1996). Within the district under study, parents may choose from a wide variety of school types, including neighborhood schools (schools in one's neighborhood, for which there is no special application process, but which offer expedited admission to those who are residentially "zoned" there), magnet schools (schools that specialize in a topic or area, and for which there is a special application process), vanguard schools (schools that accept high-achieving students into specialized programs, and which require a special application), and charter schools (which are accountable to the district, but which have some measure of pedagogical freedom). Parents may also choose private schools or home schooling, which are not held to district accountability standards. If parents do not choose either of the latter two options, they may choose to send their children to any school in the district, regardless of school type or location, provided that the student fulfills any school requirements (testing scores, special application forms, etc.) and there is room for the student in the school. In other words, it is an "open enrollment" district, wherein accountability data are distributed to parents in an effort to guide the choice process.

In this milieu of options, and at a time when school quality indicators are available to anyone with access to the internet, I will argue that parents do not exclusively or even extensively use these data. The interview data analyzed herein suggest this may be because such school quality data do not provide the types of information in which parents are most interested,

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<sup>3</sup> The suit against the district was funded by the Campaign for a Color-Blind America, the institutional predecessor of the Project for Fair Representation, which sued the University of Texas at Austin in 2012 for similar enrollment practices. For a more in-depth discussion of color-blind rhetoric and politics, see the Literature Review below.

such as racial demographics, or indications of student poverty (Schneider, Marschall, Roch, and Teske 1999; Buckley and Schneider 2007; Ben-Porath 2009). Additionally, parents' goals for their children's education revolve around social mobility and status attainment, particularly at a time when the American Dream and its formerly dependable routes to material comfort are "fading" (Bourdieu 1984; Labaree 1997; Fuller, Elmore, and Orfield 1996:6).

This social pressure for status, in many cases, sends parents running for the safest bet, which is not necessarily the school with the best test scores, the lowest teacher turnover, or any of the other data that are aggregated into a school's accountability profile. Rather, safe is whatever collective opinion says the "good" schools are – usually, the schools that have a majority of white, affluent students (Saporito and Lareau 1999; Schneider et al. 1999; Saporito 2003; Tarasawa 2012). "Although the internet is praised for offering more academic quality indicators – such as test scores – for making 'smarter' school choices, we cannot ignore the fact that many parents are using this resource to look more closely – with racial biases – at their children's future classmates" (Dougherty et al. 2009:545).

For instance, both Clapp et al. (2008) and Dougherty et al. (2009) found that parents in Connecticut "seem to be more concerned about the changes in demographic attributes, particularly percent Hispanic students, than changes in test scores when deciding how much to pay for homes" that are near their children's school(s) (Clapp et al. 2008:463). Dougherty et al. (2009) also found that, over a ten year period between 1996 and 2005, parents' concern over racial demographics became an increasingly influential factor in their school choices, while school test score data became less influential. Buckley and Schneider (2007) reported that parents' behavior on an informational school choice website in DC revealed that there was a "strong bias toward accessing the demographic characteristics of the student population" when

browsing the site, rather than accessing or assessing school quality indicators, which were also available (2007:127). Specifically, parents focused most on schools with lower percentages of black students (Buckley and Schneider 2007:133).

High-status parents who have the means to avoid schools with higher percentages of minority students, either because they can afford to buy a home in a certain neighborhood (Gotham 2002; Clapp et al. 2008; Frankenberg 2013), or because they have the connections to get into what is considered a “good” school (Jellison Holme 2002), often reproduces existing patterns of school enrollment and segregation under the banner of individual choice, freedom, and equity (Saporito and Sohoni 2006). As demonstrated above, the “disinclination of middle-class parents to commit themselves to neighborhoods whose public schools serve mainly poor (and often also minority ethnic) children” is well-documented (Rose et al. 2012:446).

Ultimately, as the saying goes, parents want “what’s best” for their children. In a school choice system which offers such a variety of options, parents face the inevitable moment when they must decide what “best” means. This determination is influenced by existing knowledge structures, or schemas<sup>4</sup> of collective belief. Schemas are “ways of understanding and identifying oneself, making sense of one’s problems and predicaments, identifying one’s interests, and orienting one’s action;” they are “the mechanisms through which interpretation is constructed” (Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004:47, 44). These mechanisms of social interpretation are highlight the “deeply embedded, shared mental representations” that exist in a society (Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004:40). Parents “operationalise” these schemas, which very often do not feature accountability data, to choose (Durkheim 1982 [1895]:62). This social interpretation and operationalization can happen even “with minimal or ambiguous inputs,” a process which is

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<sup>4</sup> In describing schemas, Sewell (1992) says that they are “not only the array of binary oppositions that make up a given society’s fundamental tools of thought, but also the various conventions, recipes, scenarios, principles of action, and habits of speech and gesture built up with these fundamental tools” (1992:7-8).

demonstrated by many of the parent narratives below (Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004:44).

Utilizing evidence from twenty-one in-depth qualitative interviews, the following paper will critique the premises of accountability-based school choice, asserting that accountability data is not the exclusive, or even the primary driver of parents' choices. Rather, color-blind cultural logics play a significant and immediate role in how parents determine what schools are best.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Accountability-based school choice posits that parents (1) have access to relevant, quantitative accountability data, (2) use this data primarily or exclusively to weigh every possible school option and its potential outcomes, and (3) make choices. Parents are seen as individual, rational actors whose choices are shaped primarily by the data provided by schools or districts. This assumes the primacy of accountability data in making these decisions, and also frames the choice process as “a market culture situating schools as a private, consumer good” (Olson Beal and Hendry 2012:544).

Critiques of these basic premises are numerous. Some assert that parents have differential amounts of access to the information, tools, or knowledge required to choose (Blau 1997; van Dunk and Dickman 2002; Betebenner, Howe, and Foster 2005; Dougherty et al. 2009; Santos and Nordlund 2012). Others take issue with the idea that people weigh every available option, claiming instead that most are more apt to use shorthand, heuristic devices that comprise a sort of “bounded” rationality (Schneider et al. 1999; Robles 2007; Ben-Porath 2009). Finally, many argue that even if people had the best available information, and the ability to consider each unique option, the idea of a “best” option is narrow, and often based on white, middle-class

norms (Jellison Holme 2002; Wilkins 2011; Kelly 2012). The critique outlined here will take a slightly different approach, arguing that parents rarely use accountability data at all in making their choices. Instead, they predominantly rely on collective logics regarding race and its meaning in the school environment.

### Durkheim: A More Collective Approach

For Durkheim, the forces of society – in the form of shared beliefs, ideals, and practices – govern the action of the individual, and claims that people do not act as completely free agents, but are implicitly influenced by this collective body of beliefs (Durkheim 2001 [1912]:154-155). The individual essentially enacts the force of the collective, and thus individual action is inherently social and shaped by systems of belief that are “organized within” each person (Durkheim 2001 [1912]:157). Thus, in the U.S. school market, a parent does not enact a private, individualistic decision, by using disembodied data points to analyze the “best fit” for his or her child. Rather, parents depend on social information passed along through their social environments, and these cultural logics are embedded in a particular symbolic, racialized context (Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004).

In the United States, the mainstream collective belief system features conceptions of individualism, free will, meritocracy, and upward mobility – key ideological and symbolic features of society (Durkheim 1982 [1895]:56; Gallagher 2003, Bobo 2004, Forman 2004, Gallagher 2008, Sikkink and Emerson 2008, Tarasawa 2012). These beliefs are constitutive tenets of the “American Dream,” or the universal accessibility of upward mobility through hard work (Johnson 2006; Oliver and Shapiro 2006). Public education, conceived since its early days in the U.S. as an equalizing force, is still understood by many Americans as a means of upward mobility. The role of school choice is a consistent feature of this rhetoric, since giving parents

the right to choose their schools essentially gives them the power to determine their children's destinies (Brantlinger, Majd-Jabbari, and Guskin 1996, Gallagher 2003, Billingham and McDonough Kimelberg 2013).

In a context where the individual is widely understood to be responsible for his/her own success, the U.S. legacies of slavery, segregation, and racial inequality are thus interpreted through this meritocratic lens, which deeply affects how race and racial inequality are understood (Wilson 1987; Bonilla-Silva 1996; Barnhouse Walter 2001; Gotham 2002; Croll 2011). Visible outcomes of long-term social inequality, combined with the collective emphasis on individual success, make it such that race signifies complex and meaningful information in social moments like school choice. The overwhelming presence of racial minorities in a school (per whatever "tipping point" a parent may have), a school's location in a segregated or impoverished area, negative media coverage, and gossip about a school's non-academic qualities all racialize school landscapes and the school choice process itself (Sikkink and Emerson 2008, Tarasawa 2012). These social meanings and interpretations – in other words, cultural logics – strongly inform parents' decisions (Blumer 1958; Saporito and Lareau 1999; Lewis 2004; Woodward 2006; Bischoff 2008; Posey 2012).

Because legislation prohibiting formal discrimination has been in place for many years, many assume that the "problem" of race and its effects on life chances are no longer with us (Lewis 2004; Winddance Twine and Gallagher 2008; Bobo and Charles 2009). Interestingly, this can create an environment in which people do not often openly or straightforwardly discuss race, even if and when they utilize race as a meaning-making tool in their everyday lives. This "color-blind racism," or the collective constructs, language, and actions which use race to construct meaning without addressing it explicitly, help create an environment in which racial

discrimination may persist undisturbed in other, less explicit forms (Bonilla-Silva and Glover 2004; Bonilla-Silva 2006). Color-blindness in the U.S. exists in a unique context of individualism and historical racial segregation, and an era in which many believe that a “post-racial” world has been successfully achieved (Gallagher 2003; Gallagher 2008; Lewis and Manno 2011). Due to formal removal of discrimination from (most) U.S. legislation, persistent social inequalities are interpreted not as the result of systemic inequality, but as the outcome of negative choices made by unmotivated individuals, who do not subscribe to the individualistic American ideal (Barth and Noel 1972; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Alexander 2010).

Deviance from this ideal is explained using collective, individualistic narratives which often revolve around the “fault” of the poor, the “culture of poverty,” or other color-blind cultural logics (Alex-Assensoh 1995; Emerson, Smith, and Sikkink 1999; Jellison Holme 2002; Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2011). While many find it difficult to voice their concerns, beliefs, or assumptions about race directly, they do so in less explicit ways. Coded language and racial proxies – for instance, associating minorities with poverty, violence, and other social ills – are two common means by which race is more commonly, albeit implicitly, discussed (Tuan and Shio 2011:56).

Take, for example, the way some respondents asserted their dislike for the way “the kids talk” at a certain school, or claimed they were concerned about the motivation, conduct, or academic achievement of the students there (Posey 2012). Parents also express their wariness about collective perceptions of low school quality – perceptions that, in many cases, are correlated with a higher-than-desired concentration of minority students in said schools (Saporito and Lareau 1999; Sikkink and Emerson 2008; Lewis and Manno 2011). Additionally, parents (in both the extant literature and in the data analyzed here) use shared code words, such as “urban,”



“inner city,” “gang,” or “sink school” to describe schools where minority or poor students are present, which also often happen to be schools where they do not wish to send their own children (Byrne 2009:431). By using these codes and making these assumptions, parents draw on and dialogically interact with U.S. color-blind cultural logics, using race as an implicit signifier for the undesirable, dangerous, or taboo.<sup>5</sup> These codes have become embedded in people’s everyday lives, and in the American habitus<sup>6</sup> (Bourdieu 1984).

## METHOD

This study is based on twenty-one in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with high-status parents in the city of study from the spring of 2013 to the spring of 2014. This group was originally selected because of my primary interest in how whites understand and discuss race in different areas of their lives. As I became more interested in school choice specifically, I continued to sample from this group, as high-status whites have greater financial and social capital than other groups, and thus higher than average access to choice (Oliver and Shapiro 2006; Shapiro 2004; Bourdieu 1984; Kochhar, Richard and Taylor 2011).<sup>7</sup> Having frequented a local park, I knew that the racial makeup of the place was, largely, both wealthy and white, two factors that contribute heavily to social status in the United States (Oliver and Shapiro 2006).<sup>8</sup> The area surrounding the park (home to many respondents) is also quite wealthy and white – a full 80% of residents are white, nearly 80% have a bachelor’s degree or higher, and median household income is over \$150,000 (United States Census Bureau 2010). An adjacent

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<sup>5</sup> Tables 4 through 11 highlight how race is collectively understood and utilized by parents in interpreting the desirability of various school environments.

<sup>6</sup> According to Sewell (1992) term “habitus,” originally coined by Pierre Bourdieu, describes “an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted, the habitus engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions consistent with those conditions and no others” (Sewell 1992:15). The word is used to describe how people act in the world, and why.

<sup>7</sup> See Table 3 in Appendix for specific data on respondent neighborhoods.

<sup>8</sup> In my first three months at the park, I calculated 58 unique whites and 15 unique non-whites in 14 observations. There certainly were others who attended when I was not there, but based on my own data and experience there were few non-whites at the park.

neighborhood, where many other respondents live, is 88% white, 86% bachelor's degree-holding, and has a median household income of over \$200,000 (United States Census Bureau 2010). Demographically speaking, I had a hunch that many parents at the park might have answers to my questions – namely, how do well-to-do people make school choices, and how do they talk about those choices after the fact?

Study protocols were approved by the Rice Institutional Review Board (IRB).<sup>9</sup> Once approval was received, I began recruiting at a local park by posting flyers and starting conversations with people there.<sup>10</sup> After I had found a few key respondents with access to larger groups of people who frequented the park, I depended on them for recommendations and introductions to new recruits. Most of the initial interviews took place on site at the park, while later interviews took place at a coffee shop, at a library, and even at a karate dojo.

The interview guide was semi-structured, and asked respondents a variety of questions about how they chose where to live and send their children to school. Other questions about respondent employment, church-going, and leisure time were also addressed, but were not included in the current analysis. All interviews were conducted by the author, and lasted between about twenty and seventy minutes (averaging about forty-five minutes),<sup>11</sup> and all were audio recorded per respondents' written consent. Each participant was given a unique ID, pseudonyms were used throughout all interview transcription, and signed consent forms were kept in a secure location.<sup>12</sup> Data were transcribed and coded in an ongoing fashion, such that there arose a back-and-forth dialogue between interviews, the field, and the relevant literature. As such, my initial

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<sup>9</sup> Rice University study protocol number: 13-162X

<sup>10</sup> Site observations occurred at the beginning of the project. Many of the findings are not relevant to the current analyses, with the exception of the demographic details about the park that are outlined herein.

<sup>11</sup> The parents I interviewed were busy people. Many were stay-at-home moms, who were often juggling between one errand and the next in the course of their packed schedules. I was grateful for the time they were able to give to the project, but in many cases it was not as much time as I would have liked. Additionally, there were some respondents who were resistant to answering questions with more than one- or two-word replies.

<sup>12</sup> Respondent characteristics may be found in Tables 1 and 2 in the Appendix.

research question was reevaluated and shaped into its current form, “How do high-status parents choose schools?”

I was initially interested in exploring the topic of race broadly, but the ways in which parents use race as a signifying tool in their school choices quickly became the primary processes of interest. I focused increasingly on the ways in which such racializing processes unfold, how they are connected to larger color-blind ideologies, how they are justified by parents, and how they reveal parents’ implicit values around schooling and race. Codes used in analysis included multiple flags for when parents discussed race either directly (less common) or indirectly (much more common). The description for the first code, race01, states: *Discusses race directly – either that of whites, or non-whites. Uses the words “race,” “ethnicity,” “racism,” etc.* The second code, race02, is described thusly: *Discusses race indirectly, through the use of codes or other language; ex: “urban,” “ghetto,” “gangs,” “low-income,” “teen pregnancies,” “violence,” “drugs,” “not motivated,” etc. Racial codes about whites include “well-educated,” “nice people,” “safe neighborhood,” “not ghetto,” “kids who care about education,” “quality school,” “American,” etc.* Examples were taken directly from the literature, or were actual quotes from parents I interviewed.

Analyses also came to highlight how these decision-making processes both reveal and perpetuate segregation by race and class. While I began the study recruiting high-status whites, some nonwhite, high-status participants also volunteered to do an interview. I included a few their narratives to provide a sense of the reach and influence of color-blind cultural logics, and how they play a role in decision-making for whites and nonwhites alike.

My analyses of the following data represent interpretations of respondents’ narratives, which are guided extensively by contextual information provided by each respondent during his

or her interview, as well as by the relevant literature. Person and place names are identified by pseudonym and nondescript titles respectively. The only specific person and place details provided are those which are un-identifiable, and which are relevant to the analyses.

## FINDINGS

### The Value of Education: Determining Best and Worst

*“Cause, you know – I mean, I think for the most part, everybody wants to do what’s right. It’s just often times wonderin’ what’s right...”* (Steven, 57, father of 2)

Parents value education, and this value is reflected in the ways parents approach educational decision-making and the ways that they talk about their educational choices. The value of education and its role in the future wellbeing of their children (especially for upward social mobility), are mentioned often in parents’ narratives of school choice. Some describe how they made sacrifices in order to help their children attain a level of education to which they did not have access themselves, in order to promote their children’s success and upward mobility.

Sally, a white mother of two children, says:

“I realized that I didn’t have the same kind of education as a lot of people in this world had, and I really wanted my children to be well-educated.”

For Sally, this desire translated into a protracted and very intense “shopping” period, during which she decided that private school was the best option for her children and would offer them the best odds of later status attainment:

“...there are some schools where I think you can get a, a quality education, in a public, uh, environment. We just decided to fork over the money and, and to go the fairly definite route, rather than to take any chances.”<sup>13</sup>

“Taking chances,” when betting on a child’s future, is not something parents – especially those with the resources to enroll their children in private school – are willing to do. Sally and so many

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<sup>13</sup> Ellipses appearing alone denote respondent pauses, or cases in which respondents began speaking earlier, but the reported version begins at a relevant point of entry. Ellipses appearing in parentheses denote where sections of the response was removed for parsimony’s sake. In every such instance, the context of the response remains stable.

other parents were not sure their children would have been admitted to selective college programs if they hadn't attended private school, or the best available public schools, when they were young. Because their children's future success is at stake, parents want a sure option. For those who can afford it, this sometimes means leaving the public school system altogether even as they give lip service to the "quality education" found in the public system. For those who cannot afford private school, or who refuse to pay for primary education when public options are available, finding a sure option means achieving the best possible public alternative.

Determining the best schooling option – public or private – requires a collective understanding of what makes a quality school. Because parents deeply value education and what it can provide for their children, I found that schools tend to exist along a spectrum of options ranging from those most highly desired or revered (and therefore protected) to those most avoided. Classification of the "best" and "worst" schools is collectively determined, assigning social value to those schools which are seen as good and social stigma to those which are seen as bad – and then passing it on. The narratives of parents who enroll their children in public schools (either out of desire or necessity) most effectively highlight this value system, and their choices reflect the ways in which their categorizations do not arise from the utilization of accountability data, but from wholly other concerns.

Some parents who cannot afford private school, or who are dedicated to public education, are able to relocate their families to housing that lies within the catchment area of a particular school. Even though school choice ideally allows parents to choose schools outside of their designated school zone, many parents understand that coveted seats at the best neighborhood schools go first to those students living in the immediate area. Thus, several parents with whom I spoke had made the choice to move into a particular zone because they had heard that the

schools there were desirable. Brenda, a white mother of three, stated that "... one of the things that attracted us to (the area) was the elementary school." Dorothy, a white mother of two grown children, relayed her own strategy, when asked about the schools her children had attended:

"Uh, they're public schools, and they were the schools they were zoned for. A lot of people in (the area) go private, but that wasn't, was not in our price range (...) It was zoning. Well, and that was one reason why we moved there. So there would be... good schools for them to go to."

The neighborhoods in which Dorothy, Brenda, and most of the respondents live are not inexpensive. Parents who are able to move into a particular area to ensure that their children can attend the right school have unique access to social and financial capital which allows them to know that the area schools are sought after and to purchase a home to ensure a spot.

Dwayne, a white father of three, similarly claimed that he moved to his neighborhood because of what he had heard about the schools. He "hadn't really examined the middle schools and the high schools that much," but was concerned about getting his kids into the right schools. He had heard which schools were considered good and where they were located, and so he moved to the area where his children would be zoned to what was widely considered a great elementary school. Jeremy, a white father of one child, emphasized the similar concern he and his wife had about putting their daughter in the *wrong* school:

"I would've loved to have lived in (our old neighborhood), but I was worried about not being able to get her into the right school, if the magnet program didn't work out then we were gonna be screwed, um, so we moved into, to, to a school we knew was zoned to a good school – or, a neighborhood we knew was zoned to a good school – and then we still got in on the magnet anyways..."

Parents like Jeremy, Dwayne, Brenda, and Dorothy do not only value education, but they value what is collectively perceived as the best education. They are willing and able to move their families to avoid those schools that will "screw" them, and get into those that are considered higher quality in order to emulate collective understandings of good and bad schools.

Interestingly, in Jeremy’s case, all of the elementary schools in his former neighborhood have met district accountability standards for the past four school years on record (2008-20012).

However, they also have student populations that are between fifty and 90 percent Hispanic.<sup>14</sup>

Parents aim for the best and avoid the worst through multiple decisions over time. As mentioned previously, some go the “definite” route from the beginning of their children’s education, avoiding public schools altogether. Private schools offer parents the promise of good educational investment, while allowing them to avoid some of the problems encountered in public schools. Other parents choose private schools later on in their children’s educational trajectories, and for different reasons. Brenda listed certain issues at the local public high school that she believed warranted avoiding the school, even though she proudly declared her support of public education and had sent two of her children to public schools through their middle school years:

“I’m not crazy about (the high school). They’re more focused on um, you know, high school pregnancies, and dropout rate – it is truly an urban school, and their issues are huge, and uh, if you're absolutely brilliant, you’re fine. But if you’re just a good student, you get lost. And there's no one to help you. You can’t, uh, from what I understand you can't get appointments with the counselors, um, you know, you’ve gotta hire out for absolutely everything. You, uh, you can’t, there’s a l-, you know, some of the – there’s not enough lockers for the kids, s-, sometimes not enough chairs for the kids – it’s just too much. If it was a neighborhood school it’d be great.”

Such problems become more salient to parents as their children advance in their educational careers, and as the realities of college and professional life move ever closer. It is at the transitions between elementary, middle, and high school that parents’ choices are most affected by concerns like those listed by Brenda. At such critical junctures, parents use these types of issues – whether they are real, perceived, or received secondhand – as justification for avoiding certain schools and choosing others. Even among parents who voice their support for publicly

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<sup>14</sup> Similar data on schools mentioned frequently by respondents can be found in Tables 4-11 in the Appendix.

funded education, perceptions of “urban”-ness, or other social or administrative problems within schools inspire flight from the public system. The high school is, in fact, one of the most sought-after public high schools in the city. While the school missed district accountability standards during the 2011-2012 school year, it met them in the three previous years on record.

Additionally, the school’s population of “one-third for each [racial/ethnic] group” did not seem to be amenable to Brenda’s personal “tipping point” (Tedin and Weiher 2004:1130-1131).<sup>15</sup>

Several parents in my sample shared experiences similar to Brenda’s. These parents outspokenly supported public schools, yet when they encountered or anticipated some of its more negative aspects, they opted out. Abigail, a white mother of three and a public school enthusiast told me about her own experiences sending her children to a public school, then opting for a private middle school:

“So we, we picked the elementary school because we thought it was good. It was, it had an exemplary rating, and, what I didn’t understand is that exemplary rating is on a, it’s a relative scale (...) They were consumed by, um, wanting to make sure the kids scored well on those tests (...) I had chosen that school because it, against another school... one outside the loop in (the neighborhood), one inside the loop. I chose the one inside the loop (...) But I didn't get that academic side, and I was very disappointed. So then, and, and contrasting with that, my older one went straight to middle school private middle school, and that was a fantastic experience.”

Others, too, felt that the system of standardized testing within the public schools – hallmark of school accountability and school choice – was frustrating and ultimately provided inaccurate representations of school quality. Gia, a white mother of two who is originally from Europe echoed this sentiment:

“Yeah, because they want to be able to benchmark and, you know, benchmarking always has to come back to 0-1 digit, where you have to be able to measure and give values. How do you give values to creativity, innovative thinking, how do you be valued? You have to have a teacher that is qualified to do that, and I’m afraid the teachers I’ve come across...”

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<sup>15</sup> See Table 10 for demographic and accountability data on the high school described here.



Gia, like Brenda and Abigail, had sent her children to public schools before opting to send them to private schools for high school, when they concluded that the hassle of testing and accountability had done too great a disservice to their children's education. In short, some parents found the accountability data provided by the district to be downright unreliable, and thus used their own methods of assessing schools. In the rare instances when school accountability information was used to make a school decision, it was often seen as a secondary, inadequate measure not to be trusted.

### Place Racialization: How High-Status Parents Use Race as a Meaning-Making Tool

*“They’re just, honestly it’s like you just see, it just looks dirty. And you see people walking around, and you don’t see, you don’t see people being classy, you just see dirty. And it’s like, kind of like the Walmart over here, you know, it’s borderline in a good neighborhood, but it is disgusting. ‘Cause there’s Section 8 housing around it, and you know, I hate to call it ghetto, but it is. People don’t dress nicely, they’re just cursing and being gross, and it smells nasty. It’s just, and you know, there are some, as I said nice areas around it, but it’s just – I don’t even know how those areas form...” (Jacquelyn)*

Few respondents referred to racial stereotypes about poverty as explicitly as Jacquelyn did in her discussion of how she decide where to live, and where to spend her time.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, such colorblind cultural logics – which use poverty or “class” as signifiers of minority residents – play a central role in the schooling decisions of many parents. Respondents emphasized how certain features of a school’s environment or reputation – like the presence of students from other parts of town, school violence and gang activity, or drugs – had kept them from considering schools in the past, or concerned them about enrolling their kids in specific schools in the future. Several of these stated features were framed in such a way that it was quite clear that parents were referring, either explicitly or by proxy, to racial diversity at the schools in question, or within the surrounding neighborhoods. These narratives were interesting in their

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<sup>16</sup> Jacquelyn was one of a handful of respondents who didn’t have children, but whom I still decided to interview in order to get a sense of how Houston residents see their environments as shaped by race. Jacquelyn had quite a few things to say on the matter, in addition to the quote provided here.

unambiguous boundary-making – the ways in which parents distinguished themselves and their children from other families in the city, and sometimes used this distinction to justify their avoidance of a particular school or geographic area. Such details emphasize that parents do not solely or even primarily use school accountability data to make school decisions. Rather, they depend on what they see and hear about schools – messages that are often racially oriented.

Although Dwayne sent his children to public schools throughout their early educational careers, he drew sharp divisions between his own children and some of the other students within the school, which were largely based on race:

“And, there’s a lot of good, high-quality kids there, but there were also a lot of lesser-quality kids there. And, um, fair number of minorities, there, and... there were fights, you know, boys that age, you know their testosterone’s just ragin’ in ‘em. And uh, so they had altercations and things like that, but they always dealt with ‘em, pretty effectively... Yeah, um – oh, drugs, and things. Um, you know the hormones are ragin’, in the boys and the girls, and, occasionally a girl would turn up pregnant, or something, and I didn’t - thank god my boys never got in that situation.”

Dwayne identifies some of the same problems mentioned by Brenda – teen pregnancies, violence, and other “urban” problems. However, his mention of minority students and his differentiation between “high-quality” and “lesser-quality” kids emphasizes that he interprets of the school environment and the issues therein through a racialized lens.<sup>17</sup>

In Dwayne’s case, this understanding of school dynamics did not merit sending his children to another school, although as mentioned previously, such well-known, well-publicized issues do influence parents’ enrollment decisions. Tiffany, an Asian mother of three, highlights such issues, but her focus is on perceived differences between local public high schools which will clearly influence where she decides to send her own children:

“But um, yeah we hear um, (the other local) High School, um, and you usually hear them in news, that um, um, you know, you know, particular things happening, or there was a fight or something, you know there’s, someone’s been stabbed and things like that. Um,

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<sup>17</sup> See Table 10 for demographic information on the high school described here.

and um, it's a few other high schools, and it's usually, you know, further west or south from here (...) but, but I, I, I'm, I'm always relieved when it's, Oh, you know, it's not our high school here."<sup>18</sup>

While Dwayne reported that he continued to send his children to their local public high school despite what he saw as a problematic, racialized environment, Tiffany's narrative shows that she will avoid local high school with the "gangs" and reported stabbings (which is also majority black and Hispanic). Many scholars have noted the use of code words like "gang," "urban," "inner city," and "crime," which are used to talk about race without naming either the topic itself, or a specific minority group (Omi and Winant 1994; Bonilla-Silva 2001). Tiffany could have instead mentioned that this high school had only met accountability standards once in the past five school years.<sup>19</sup> Instead, like Dwayne, Tiffany determine the quality and desirability of a school by using the racial makeup of the students as a guide.

Similarly, Mary, a white mother of three describes how she and other parents negotiate the demographics of student populations, and how these details have influenced large-scale aversion from a particular public middle school, (which is also mostly black and Hispanic):

"I think, you know, I think (the local middle school) has gotten a lot of bad press over the last, ten years, um, I think it draws from a, uh, rougher neighborhoods (...) um, and I think, uh... they're a little intimidated by that. And so you have, I mean, a huge percentage of kids from (the elementary school) – they do not go (there)."

The school Mary describes saw a nearly 15% drop in white enrollment in the four years leading up to the 2011-2012 school year and has met district accountability standards in all four of the last four reported years.<sup>20</sup> The school is located in a neighborhood that is 88% white, making it one of the whitest areas in the larger metro area. It is also highly affluent. Therefore, the "rougher" neighborhoods from which Mary claims it draws students, then, are most likely to be

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<sup>18</sup> Demographic information for the high school with reported stabbings and gang activity is outlined in Table 11. The high school the Tiffany describes as "our high school" is detailed in Table 9.

<sup>19</sup> Source available upon request

<sup>20</sup> See Table 8 for more demographic information on this middle school.

less affluent black and Hispanic students, whose presence “intimidate[s]” locals. Things as subjective as emotion can effectively determine the collective understanding of a particular school as “rough,” even when the accountability data tell a different story about the school’s quality. A school’s student population and its reputation, then, are alternative forms of data that parents use to identify a school as one to avoid.

In other instances, parents’ interpretations of the surrounding area determine how they understand the school as a racialized place. Some parents told me about how they had physically intervened in the immediate geographic area in order to alter both the neighborhood and school populations. Dorothy says (of the same school to which Mary referred):

“Um, (the middle school) was... okay. It’s better now – every year it gets better because this, the whole area that feeds into (the school) is – this, this neighborhood across, where I live now, when my husband and I moved in (...) Those blocks were all taken up by these huge, just disgusting, run-down apartment buildings. And they actually, I mean they had crack dealers out on the street. And, um, that neighborhood association got together and raised funds – and bought the properties when they came up for sale. And tore ‘em down, and then found another use for ‘em. It was, it was, they were, I dunno, the apartment buildings were probably from the twenties or thirties, they were really rat holes, I mean they were really... So the neighborhood just got together and got rid of it all.”

In the American context, where the war on drugs has become bound up in race symbolism and political rhetoric, it is hardly a stretch to deduce what Dorothy meant by “crack dealers” (Bobo and Thompson 2010; Alexander 2010). At any rate, Dorothy’s story shows how powerful urban actors can physically change the surrounding landscape to align with their perceptions of safety and order, sometimes forcing the exile of existing residents (Logan and Molotch 1987).

Rather than forcing other residents out, some respondents felt themselves pushed out by changing racial and ethnic trends in their neighborhoods. Stacy, a Hispanic mother of two, describes her largely poor, Hispanic neighborhood:

“Um, now the neighborhood has, a, a lot of people that were established there have moved on out of it, and what has happened is there’s been a big push of Hispanics that have moved in there. (...) The nickname for it’s ‘Taco Town.’ You know, so, um, it’s a lot of working class, there’s a lot of houses on our street that rent, you know, so, you never know who’s gonna come in there, you know, and it’s constantly revolving and you know, lotta cars on the street, lot of, you know, traffic. And the, the street we live on is actually, kind of the last street, and unless you live on there you really shouldn’t be on that street. And, so he said you know, ‘This is getting to be too much.’ But, we’re trying to wait for a point when my older daughter is transitioning grade levels...”

Stacy and her husband desire to move out of their neighborhood, which they see as transitioning toward a less desirable population – of their own co-ethnics. Even though she and her husband both identify as Hispanic, they do not approve of the type of Hispanic families that are moving in – low-income renters who are constantly in flux and who bring increased traffic, contribute to dilapidated housing, and generally damage their own sense of safety. Several times, Stacy mentioned their plans to move to another neighborhood with more desirable people and surroundings. They describe their surroundings in a colorblind way, reacting to the race and ethnicity of their neighbors via racialized their stigmatized behaviors. Even though Stacy is mostly pleased with the schools in their neighborhood, getting out of the area is most important for her and her family.

#### Diversity and Cultural Capital: Preparation for “Real Life”

In addition to these somewhat negative estimations of diversity, many respondents (including some of those who stated such concerns) also stated that they were delighted to give their children access to diverse school environments. The frames typically used in such narratives emphasized that parents thought of school diversity as a form of cultural capital that they could give to their children as a way of preparing them for “the real world” (Bourdieu 1986). Their narratives consisted of sweeping, idyllic depictions of the value of diversity, and listed the practically-oriented reasons parents wanted their children to be exposed to diverse

environments. However, they also revealed that in the most diverse school environment, students are often separated within the school through more institutionalized forms of social division.

Additionally, several of the parents who espouse positive views about diversity for their children balance this positivity with their concerns about racial diversity in their neighborhoods – part of the “real world” for which they purportedly want their children to be prepared.

Jeremy, who was vocally pro-integration throughout his interview, was (unsurprisingly) supportive of diversity within his daughter’s public high school:

“Uh, so yeah, I think it’s diver-, I, I, I’m very happy to see it’s diverse. Um, my daughter went to (the local high school), and there the ratios were about 30-30-30, you know, and then a mix of others, um, and that was very – that made me really happy to see that because I just feel like, um, it’s real important that you, get some mix.”

Several parents mentioned this ideal “mix” to me, emphasizing its role in exposing children to people and practices which were unfamiliar, or to low-income families, whom Tiffany and Deanna both described as rare encounters for the more privileged children in the area. Laurie, a Hispanic mother of two, similarly described the milieu at the public elementary and middle schools that her children attend:

“And the schools that they go to, um, also have diversity, so um, they’re exposed to different cultures and people, um, different personalities, um, so I think it gets them ready for real world situations, plus going into high school, (the high school’s) huge. Um, and, and then of course college, so I think, um, it just gets them prepared and nothing fazes them anymore, nothing is, um, weird, or um, different. You know everyone’s equal, in a way, and I think that’s – and now, definitely, *in today’s world*, it’s um, huge, um, benefit.” (emphasis added)

Laurie’s emphasis on teaching equality seems to emphasize her knowledge that, in reality, social equality is uncommon. Laurie and others desire that their children have such experiences while they are young, so that they take the lessons with them into the world.<sup>21</sup> However, Laurie’s own

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<sup>21</sup> The elementary school that Laurie and Megan describe – which is majority white – is detailed in Table 6.

residential location in a neighborhood that is 80% white seems to imply that the family's residential choices do not factor into these lessons.

For Laurie, Jeremy, and many others, exposure to diversity enhances their children's social abilities and prepares them for later life in "today's world," which is, ostensibly, also diverse. Megan, a white mother of two, says:

"...the people that were going to school there, there were kids from you know, from different religions, different cultural backgrounds, there were Asians, there were African Americans, there were Hispanics – and I really liked that, I liked the fact that my kids were gonna be seeing people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds so that, you know they got a good, rounded view of what life is like (...) there are a lot of people who go to (the school) that are not zoned to the school, they don't live in the neighborhood, but they live nearby (...) And so, that sort of, I think it contributes to the diversity, of, the people that the kids meet, and the customs we hear about..."

At the elementary level, parents tend to view diversity as a sort of innocuous privilege for their children, who have access to different cultures and with different backgrounds. For these early elementary years, few parents with whom I spoke said they were concerned about the presence of minority students in their children's schools. Rather, they encouraged diversity, and some (like Megan) used it as a teaching tool to help their children learn about difference. Even parents like Sally, who sent their children to highly segregated private schools, grasped for any semblance of diversity within those schooling environments, claiming that what little diversity did exist there was "nice." Attending a racially (or ethnically, or religiously) diverse school, in these instances, was considered a positive experience for families. Interestingly, the elementary school mentioned by both Laurie and Megan is majority white.<sup>22</sup>

The literature on U.S. education suggests that even when students attend diverse schools, students are physically and socially separated in a myriad of ways within the school building itself – particularly in middle and high school (Lucas 2001; Scott and Stuart Wells 2013; Tyson

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<sup>22</sup> See Table 6.

2013). Brenda, who bemoaned diversity at the high school level, embraced it at the middle school level – in certain situations. She admits that aside from a few classes, her children were largely separated from other “diverse” (read: minority) students, whom she associates with the school’s violence problems:

“So, um – and I like the fact that, uh, the girls got a pretty diverse there, even though there were three – you know, the three academic tiers were great. Um, but I like the fact that they were mixing, with their electives, with people from all areas of schools. They became more street smart, um, they saw fights in the hallways, but they knew how to conduct themselves – it was more real life experience.”

Brenda’s children were only “mixing” with the school’s more rough-and-tumble crowd during their electives, but were sequestered away from diverse environments in their regular courses. Interestingly, Brenda eventually chose to send all of her children to segregated private high schools with much less racial diversity.

Other parents chose not to escape diversity in the high school setting, but to send their children to diverse public high schools. Again, however, even within these settings students were physically separated based on track assignment. At the high school that Abigail’s children attend, this separation is unambiguously by race:

“And when she’s moving through the building, there are certain hallways that they have by reputation designated as, the black hallway, for example. And, um, even though she’s in classes with black students, they don’t use that hallway. And whenever you hear about, um – I don’t know how often you hear about it – but whenever I hear about some violence, or some shoving, or whatever, it’s always – and I ask her and she says ‘Well, that was in the black hallway.’ And there’s not just one. There’s sort of an area. So the building I think is physically smaller, um, the people she interacts with, she walks to classes to and from with the same people, she passes the same people in the hallways. I would love to know – and I bet they wouldn’t admit to it – but I would love to know if they actually assign those classes geographically. I, I feel like they almost have to (...) There are a few classes that are required of everybody, and we actu-, we actually call those ‘gen pop’ classes, general population classes. And, she, the, the very, very best stories come from those classes. Yeah. So, so in those classes it involves her walking to far ends of the building, and she’s in there, with – every walk of life...”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The high school that Abigail mentions is detailed in Table 9.



The narratives of Abigail and others suggest large-scale, race-based tracking systems at both the middle school and the high school level, at two area schools which serve a large number of minority students. Not only is this practice clearly embraced by the larger institutions within which it is housed, course tracking and geographic separation also create a cultural climate of division and fear that perpetuates racial stereotypes – for who would want to walk down the “black hallway” if that’s where all the “violence” takes place? What level of diversity actually exists if students are institutionally separated by race?

Given the neighborhood where all of these parents live, their definition of “diversity” and its utility for “real life experience” beg several questions. Where does “real life” begin? Is it in one’s school, one’s neighborhood, or beyond it? Why do parents seem to value diversity in the school environment, but not in their own residential environments? Under what conditions does diversity attract parents, and under what conditions does it become a liability? Laurie’s narrative about neighborhood safety illuminates potential answers:

“... (the police) patrol, you know, routinely, you know throughout (the area). And so you see them, just, patrolling, so it’s good to know – and then like, if you ever have a concern, or you have a – there’s a lot of new construction around here, and so, there’s a lot of, diversity around, and so, um, you know I’ll walk the dog, and, you know at eight a.m. in the morning, or whatever by myself, and there’s a lot of, you know, laborers out there. So um, you’re like, you, you know you always keep your eye open because that’s where you live, you know, it’s *part of today’s world*, but I’ve never felt scared or whatever – but it’s good to know that I could always call and say ‘Hey, somethin’s kinda weird,’ or, you know, like we had three constructions on our house, or um, on our street, at the same time, and I work home, by myself. Um, and so, you know, you feel – but, never had a problem.” (emphasis added)

The symmetry between Laurie’s school and neighborhood diversity narratives – captured by her use of the phrase “today’s world” – exposes an interesting paradox that several parents expressed. Laurie embraced racial and ethnic diversity in her children’s school environment, but feared the ethnic minority laborers in her own neighborhood. In the school setting, diversity is an

opportunity offered to one's children; in the neighborhood setting, diversity is uncomfortable and makes one feel unsafe, but (where necessary) it must be faced.

Diversity, mainly identified by respondents as the presence of racial minorities, thus has different significance across contexts. Whether, like Stacy, parents desire diversity because it gives their children access to co-ethnics (“You know, and, do you want her to go to a school that's primarily Caucasian, or do you want her to go where there are people that are Hispanic? Because, people are gonna naturally go to whoever's like them.”), or because it exposes them to others who are different from themselves, school is clearly the favored diversity delivery mechanism for most parents I interviewed, while the neighborhood is the setting in which families avoid, disparage, or throw out those who are not like them. School diversity at once attracts and diverts parents from certain schools, in particular contexts, across different points of a child's education. Parents even explicitly use student demographics as a reason to avoid a school. In fact, parents used this data more often than they used school accountability data. Additionally, they didn't always know the information firsthand, but typically either heard about it through social networks or saw it on the news.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the U.S. public school system, which is located within a larger, institutionalized racial hierarchy, poor minorities have come represent a sort of collective code for failing, low-quality schools as well as impoverished and dangerous neighborhoods. Parents who use color-blind cultural logics to read school and residential environments often decide to avoid schools with a large proportion of racial minority students, thereby contributing to the cycle and concentration of disadvantage. Steven, a former district educator and administrator, described it thusly:

“(...) it, you know, it's kind of a, once again, a domino effect – you got a bad school, nobody wants to teach there, so you tend to have bad students, um (...) or, you, you tend

to get the, the low-end or the brand-new teachers, uh, and so it just kinda evolves that way. But, on the flip side, it takes all your good kids away from the neighborhood schools. And so, they never have a chance to get better.”

Steven and other parents realize that this “domino effect” is a reality in the district, but must contend with powerful collective beliefs that equate minority schools with disaster. They must also face the social expectations that are born out of these beliefs, as match their desires to be pioneers in what are perceived to be low-quality schools and low-quality neighborhoods with the stigma that they fear will come of being one of the first. Being on the boundary, the frontier, is intimidating for parents. One such frontier is the middle school mentioned and avoided often by parents, including Mary:

“(Parents in the area) go to (one popular magnet school), um, they to, to (another magnet school), they do not frequent *that school* – that school’s right there. But I could say the same thing for myself, because here I am – I am gonna look at it though, for my, for, middle guy, because I have heard great things about it too, I think it’s just being the first couple of people to go.” (emphasis added)

Mary, like other parents, sent her children to more amenable, often more segregated school environments.<sup>24</sup> If Mary, and other parents, bow to collective beliefs and social desirability over their own desires, how long will parents continue to make the same decisions for the same reasons?

I did speak to some parents who intervened in local schools in order to help improve them. Says Jeremy of his own experience:

“It’s funny because this whole area around here, to my mind anyway, seemed like, starting about the late eighties, just all these young people moved in with their kids, and there was all this energy behind (the school), bringing it up, and a lot of the other inner city, uh, elementary schools, bringing those up. So we were there right when (the school) was sort of transitioning into a, a high-grade school.”

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<sup>24</sup> Demographic details for middle school described by Mary can be found in Table 8. Demographic details for the middle school where Mary sent her children can be found in Table 7.

Jeremy and his wife shared goals and strategies found by Posey (2012) in her ethnographic account of wealthy white parents and urban schools. Jeremy was part of “critical mass of like-minded parents” who moved their children into a low-performing, high-minority school in order to work together to improve conditions (Posey 2012:21). In such scenarios, rapidly shifting demographics, neighborhood gentrification, and increasingly competitive enrollment become the new problems after the old problems of such “inner city” schools and neighborhoods are traded in. As the demographic tide shifts toward more privileged and high-status families, the performance of the school often increases, as such parents have the influence required to make demands on the school. These changes, however, push the older populations out and continue the patterns of unequal access and concentrated disadvantage that inspired such privileged “pioneers” in the first place.

Most are not the pioneering type, however, and will stay far away from any school that appears to be a liability for their children’s future success, social mobility, and status attainment. The ways in which parents parse through a variety of social information to come to these conclusions has been outlined above, but perhaps the most interesting data found here are those on parents’ shifting conceptions of “diversity” in schools and neighborhoods. Future work should consider what types of work this popularly mishandled word accomplishes in particular social situations, and what it means under different conditions. Diversity and related conceptions of race and ethnicity are key to how high-status parents understand education quality. These color-blind cultural logics are “operationalised” as part and parcel of their decision-making processes (Durkheim 1982 [1895]:62). Parents’ ultimate decisions exist in a collective social context, by which their seemingly “individual,” accountability-based choices are shaped from the

outside by much different stimuli (Durkheim 1982 [1895]:57; Durkheim 2001 [1912]:154-155). These choices are made using color-blind cultural logics.

Color-blindness as a concept refers not so much to the idea that people really “don’t see color,” but that society has evolved modes of discourse that allow people to, as Royster (2003) says, “talk about race even when they appear not to be talking about race” (2003:2). Color-blindness as an ideology utilizes constructs and language that disavow the salience of racism in society and therefore allow people to attribute social problems to something outside of, or apart from race. Color-blindness thus consents to understandings of mass incarceration of blacks as an issue of black criminality rather than a racialized justice system (Alexander 2010), or black poverty as stemming from black laziness or a lack of motivation, rather than a history of systemic racial oppression (Sikkink and Emerson 1999). When the parents in my study referred to the “urban problems” in a school, it allows them to link the lack of quality they see in the school to teen pregnancy and drugs – individual acts – when the larger problem with the school is that it exists within a segregated district with unequal access to quality education. Color-blind cultural logics have arisen in a society that is built on racial inequality, but is organized by a set of social norms that say talking openly about race is unacceptable.

The reality of school choice is that high-status parents’ race, class, and overall social position give them and their children access to elite, more limited options – in other words, to the most desirable schools, and (very rarely) the resources to overtake and “bring up” schools. Their decisions are driven by color-blind cultural logics, and the social expectations therein that enforce standards and stigmatize deviance (such as “pioneering” in a poor, minority school). Additionally, once such families gain a foothold in such schools, they are represented more proportionately over time, changing the demographic tide with their very presence. Because of

the current setup of the choice program in the district, high-status parents have the best odds of securing a good school for their children – by any means necessary.

Finally, parents like those I interviewed have the capital not just to gain access to schools, but to actually buy into neighborhoods where the schools have a larger tax base and the demographics are more agreeable to their sensibilities. In other words, schools and neighborhoods into which high-status families sort themselves usually resemble them demographically to begin with. This foundational inequality contradicts the very fabric of school choice, which purports equality of access to all through the systematization of magnets and other enrollment alternatives. In a system where parents are able to hoard certain portions of the school “market” for people like themselves, and to avoid other schools en masse, how can true market actually exist, and how can choice every really be exercised by anyone but the most advantaged?

If school choice is targeted at the disadvantaged, it has not worked well for this population in practice. This is manifested in at least two elements of the choice processes of the wealthy, which are in many ways favored within the system (an unintended, but powerful consequence of the current choice regime). First, the primacy of school zones in the admission process still favors the choices over those who are able to purchase or rent homes in more expensive areas and send their children to the neighborhood schools in those areas.

Neighborhood schools which are desirable thus become overenrolled by parents who have the means to live in the right “zone,” pushing out students from other zones who might desire to attend. Second, more advantaged parents – particularly white parents – have been found to use the race of a school population as a first-order choice tool, while other concerns (like school performance/accountability) are second-order (Saporito and Lareau 1999). Black parents, on the other hand, use accountability data first and do not use race at all, although they do use poverty

in a school as a choice tool (Saporito and Lareau 1999). Thus, parents either use race (white parents) and/or poverty (black parents) as important indicators of a school's quality, thereby avoiding those schools with disadvantaged students.

School choice is an ineffective response to persistent and increasing racial inequality of opportunity and racial segregation in U.S. public schools. Choice systems created by school administrators to keep “Anglo students in their district” (in the words of one respondent) do little more than provide new mechanisms by which color-blind cultural logics and collective stereotypes work in the interest of the privileged and against the interests of the poor and the marginalized. Even in schools with more racially diverse student bodies, students are programmatically separated by tracking systems and rarely, if ever, come into contact with others unlike themselves – either racially or socioeconomically. For large, diverse, urban school districts, school choice has the capacity to become an insidious tool for continued racial segregation and concentrated disadvantage, rather than educational equity.

APPENDIX

Tables

**Table 1: Respondent Details**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>
Abigail	F	White
Barbara	F	Black
Brenda	F	White
David	M	White
Deanna	F	Hispanic
Dorothy	F	White
Dwayne	M	White
Gia	F	White
Jacquelyn	F	White
Jeremy	M	White
Katrina	F	White
Laurie	F	Hispanic
Margaret	F	White
Mary	F	White
Megan	F	White
Pearce	M	White
Sally	F	White
Stacy	F	Hispanic
Steven	M	White
Tiffany	F	Asian
Tim	M	White

**Table 2: Sample Characteristics (N = 21)**

<b>Mean Age</b>	<b>Mean # Children</b>	<b>Mean Int. Length (min.)</b>	<b>Percent White</b>	<b>Percent Female</b>
49 (13.71)	1.86 (1.06)	39 (11.69)	76%	71%

**Table 3: Neighborhood Characteristics**

<b>Neighb. ID</b>	<b>Percent White</b>	<b>Percent BA+</b>	<b>Percent Below Pov.</b>	<b>Median Income</b>
1	80%	80%	3%	\$150,000
2	88%	86%	2%	\$200,000



**Table 4: District Profile**

<b>ENROLLMENT</b>	<b>YEAR</b>				
	<b><u>Race/Ethnicity</u></b>	<b><u>2008-2009</u></b>	<b><u>2009-2010</u></b>	<b><u>2010-2011</u></b>	<b><u>2011-2012</u></b>
African American	28%	27%	26%	25%	25%
American Indian	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Asian/Pac. Islander	3%	3%	3%	3%	4%
Hispanic	61%	62%	62%	63%	63%
White	8%	8%	8%	8%	8%
Two or More	NA%	1%	1%	1%	1%
<b><u>Econ Disadvantage</u></b>	81%	80%	81%	81%	80%

**Table 5: School Profile - Most Desirable Public Elementary School**

<b>ENROLLMENT</b>	<b>YEAR</b>				
	<b><u>Race/Ethnicity</u></b>	<b><u>2008-2009</u></b>	<b><u>2009-2010</u></b>	<b><u>2010-2011</u></b>	<b><u>2011-2012</u></b>
African American	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%
American Indian	<1%	0%	0%	0%	<1%
Asian/Pac. Islander	16%	14%	15%	15%	15%
Hispanic	11%	13%	12%	10%	11%
White	71%	67%	67%	67%	68%
Two or More	NA%	4%	4%	5%	5%
<b><u>Econ Disadvantage</u></b>	4%	3%	2%	2%	2%
<b><u>AYP Rating</u></b>	Met	Met	Met	Met	-

**Table 6: School Profile - Somewhat Desirable Elementary School**

<b>ENROLLMENT</b>	<b>YEAR</b>				
	<b><u>Race/Ethnicity</u></b>	<b><u>2008-2009</u></b>	<b><u>2009-2010</u></b>	<b><u>2010-2011</u></b>	<b><u>2011-2012</u></b>
African American	5%	3%	5%	5%	6%
American Indian	0%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Asian/Pac. Islander	16%	15%	13%	16%	16%
Hispanic	29%	33%	32%	35%	36%
White	50%	46%	47%	42%	41%
Two or More	NA%	2%	2%	2%	1%
<b><u>Econ Disadvantage</u></b>	27%	28%	30%	31%	33%
<b><u>AYP Rating</u></b>	Met	Met	Met	Met	-

**Table 7: School Profile - Desirable Middle School**

<b>ENROLLMENT</b>	<b>YEAR</b>				
	<b><u>Race/Ethnicity</u></b>	<b><u>2008-2009</u></b>	<b><u>2009-2010</u></b>	<b><u>2010-2011</u></b>	<b><u>2011-2012</u></b>
African American	21%	17%	13%	11%	11%
American Indian	0%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Asian/Pac. Islander	8%	8%	9%	9%	11%
Hispanic	43%	43%	38%	37%	34%
White	28%	30%	38%	40%	41%
Two or More	NA%	2%	2%	2%	3%
<b><u>Econ Disadvantage</u></b>	52%	42%	35%	32%	32%
<b><u>AYP Rating</u></b>	Met	Met	Met	Met	-

**Table 8: School Profile - Undesirable Middle School**

<b>ENROLLMENT</b>	<b>YEAR</b>				
	<b><u>Race/Ethnicity</u></b>	<b><u>2008-2009</u></b>	<b><u>2009-2010</u></b>	<b><u>2010-2011</u></b>	<b><u>2011-2012</u></b>
African American	33%	36%	41%	40%	41%
American Indian	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Asian/Pac. Islander	10%	8%	7%	7%	7%
Hispanic	29%	31%	32%	35%	35%
White	28%	23%	18%	16%	15%
Two or More	NA%	2%	1%	1%	1%
<b><u>Econ Disadvantage</u></b>	48%	45%	53%	56%	59%
<b><u>AYP Rating</u></b>	Met	Met	Met	Met	-

**Table 9: School Profile - Desirable High School**

<b>ENROLLMENT</b>	<b>YEAR</b>				
	<b><u>Race/Ethnicity</u></b>	<b><u>2008-2009</u></b>	<b><u>2009-2010</u></b>	<b><u>2010-2011</u></b>	<b><u>2011-2012</u></b>
African American	17%	15%	18%	19%	20%
American Indian	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Asian/Pac. Islander	18%	16%	15%	14%	14%
Hispanic	30%	34%	36%	39%	41%
White	34%	31%	28%	26%	24%
Two or More	NA%	3%	2%	2%	1%
<b><u>Econ Disadvantage</u></b>	32%	32%	40%	44%	47%
<b><u>AYP Rating</u></b>	Met	Met	Missed	Missed	-

**Table 10: School Profile - Somewhat Desirable High School**

<b>ENROLLMENT</b>	<b>YEAR</b>				
	<b><u>Race/Ethnicity</u></b>	<b><u>2008-2009</u></b>	<b><u>2009-2010</u></b>	<b><u>2010-2011</u></b>	<b><u>2011-2012</u></b>
African American	27%	27%	27%	29%	29%
American Indian	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Asian/Pac. Islander	5%	5%	5%	5%	4%
Hispanic	34%	35%	35%	37%	37%
White	34%	33%	32%	28%	28%
Two or More	NA%	<1%	1%	1%	2%
<b><u>Econ Disadvantage</u></b>	44%	44%	45%	47%	47%
<b><u>AYP Rating</u></b>	Met	Met	Met	Missed	-

**Table 11: School Profile - Undesirable High School**

<b>ENROLLMENT</b>	<b>YEAR</b>				
	<b><u>Race/Ethnicity</u></b>	<b><u>2008-2009</u></b>	<b><u>2009-2010</u></b>	<b><u>2010-2011</u></b>	<b><u>2011-2012</u></b>
African American	30%	27%	28%	29%	31%
American Indian	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%	<1%
Asian/Pac. Islander	5%	4%	3%	2%	2%
Hispanic	62%	66%	65%	66%	64%
White	3%	3%	3%	2%	2%
Two or More	NA%	<1%	1%	1%	1%
<b><u>Econ Disadvantage</u></b>	83%	89%	92%	94%	88%
<b><u>AYP Rating</u></b>	Missed	Met	Missed	Missed	-

## Interview Guide

### Introduction

Let me start by introducing myself. I'm Amanda Bancroft. I'm a graduate student in the Sociology department at Rice University. I am studying how residents of the city live, work, and play in the city. I am most interested in learning about your experiences, and what it has been like to live the city as it grows more diverse. I want to find out about what your neighborhood is like, what the city schools are like, and how you came to be in the city today.

### Background

I'm going to begin by asking you some basic questions to get a sense of who you are, and to help situate you among other people I've talked with.

Age?

Where were you born?

When did you move to the city? From where? When?

Occupation?

Neighborhood?

Children? Ages? Attend(ed) city schools?

Religious background?

Overall political outlook?

### Neighborhood

I now have some questions about your experience living in the city.

How long have you lived in current neighborhood?

How would you describe the neighborhood?

Main reasons, process, *of choosing* that neighborhood?

Process of buying in that neighborhood?

Compare to other neighborhoods/(the city) proper?

Relationships with neighbors?

Do you feel safe there? Why or why not?

Is the neighborhood more or less safe than other (the city) neighborhoods? Why or why not?

Would you describe the neighborhood as diverse? In what ways?

Can you describe the demographics of the neighborhood?

### Schools

Now, I'll ask you a few questions about your experience with the city's schools.

Where your children go to school?

How would you describe the school(s)?

What drew you to the schools? Be specific.

What did you hear about the school, other schools?

Were those schools your first choice? What were others?

Process of choosing that school, process of enrolling, etc.?

Can you describe the demographics of the school(s)?

How would you rate quality?

Satisfied/happy with the school(s)?

How would you compare the school(s) to others in the city?

### Wrap-Up

Now I have a few final questions about the city.

How has your neighborhood/the city changed over the years?

How has it stayed the same?

How have you seen demographics shift/stay the same?

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