

# Final Report: GreatSchools Exploratory Research

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# Final Report

## GreatSchools Exploratory Research

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### Overview

In early 2012, GreatSchools contracted with Rockman et al to conduct an exploratory study of how parents choose schools for their children and what role technology plays—or could play—in the process. The study was designed to assist GreatSchools as they enhance the GreatSchools.org website, which currently contains over 900,000 ratings on district, charter, and private schools nationwide, and expand local programs that give parents the on-the-ground support they need to choose schools. The study, which took place in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Washington, D.C., where GreatSchools has established local school programs, and in Indianapolis, Indiana, the site of a newly launched local program, also explored how GreatSchools could leverage partnerships with service agencies, libraries, educational advocacy groups, and other local organizations to guide and support parents and explain the school options available to them.

To understand how GreatSchools might leverage a different kind of resource—the fast-growing access to mobile devices, social networks, and other digital media technologies—the study took a close look at how parents use these technologies, what features or delivery mechanisms might aid their search to find the right schools for their children.

During two, hour-long individual interviews with the 25 parents who took part in the study, and a final focus group in each site, we talked at length with parents about their technology use, the key data points or questions in their school decision-making process, and the information they need at each step. We also examined what school information might be best provided online, or through the quick dispatch of social media; what information or insights parents prefer to obtain through local organizations, other parents, or trusted friends; and what parents really want to learn for themselves, through school visits and interactions with school administrators and teachers.

What we found is that parents take school decisions very seriously and seek guidance and information from multiple sources. Most follow a similar path: they start with an idea of which schools they want to include or exclude, and turn first to the hard data, looking for test scores and other academic performance data. Next, they look for information on practical matters such as before and after-school care, and information related to school profiles, which might include the diversity in the student population or in-school and extra-curricular program offerings. Parents then move in different directions as they search for secondary sources of information, confirm opinions, and seek answers to more subjective questions, such as the quality of teachers and the learning environment for students.

We also found that parents use technology, including smartphones, frequently and comfortably. They have home internet access, and go online to make small purchases, plan trips, and keep in touch with family and friends via social networks. All the parents in our study also routinely use technology to research schools. They are more likely to use personal computers than mobile devices because of the amount of data they find themselves sorting through and the extended blocks of time devoted to their research. When it comes to making a final decision about schools, parents rely on first-hand experience.

This report shares further detail on these findings, which were surprisingly consistent across the three sites, occupation, gender, and the grade level of school-age children. The report also describes the differences that emerged in how wide a net parents cast in their school searches, how the school choice landscape is changing in each of the three cities, and how parents respond to the competition that sometimes accompanies expanded school choice.

## Recruitment and Samples

Recruitment for the study began in mid-February 2012, with assistance from GreatSchools coordinators in Milwaukee and Washington, who provided contact information for parents they had directly assisted and those who had signed up with GreatSchools during school fairs or other information sessions. The Milwaukee and Washington coordinators also contacted the partner organizations they work with, asking that they recruit as appropriate on our behalf. In Indianapolis, we worked through Stand for Children, the partner organization for the new Indianapolis local program, and posted flyers in libraries and other institutions across the city.

The flyers and announcements, which partner organizations emailed to potential participants or posted on Facebook, presented basic information about the study: we were looking for approximately 10 parents in each site who would be willing to share their school choice experiences during two interviews and a focus group, each lasting one hour. We offered parents a \$150 incentive, and provided a toll-free number and link to an online sign-up survey. On the survey and during phone registrations, parents provided information about the age and grade levels of their children, the types of schools under consideration, and their technology use.

Recruitment efforts netted 60 potential participants across sites, and from this group we selected a purposive sample of 10 participants per site, who offered the best range and representation across grade levels, school types, and technology use, as well as some income diversity, indicated by ward and township information. We extended invitations via phone or email to those parents, most of whom accepted. In cases where parents were subsequently unable to take part in interviews, we invited additional parents from our master list.

Table 1 shows the distribution across sites in the final samples. The columns in blue show the grade level of the oldest child, or whether parents were primarily considering elementary, middle, or high schools. Several parents were considering a broader range of grades—either looking ahead to school choices for younger children or factoring the options for later grades into their decisions. Gray columns show the types of schools under consideration; totals exceed the number of participants because parents consider multiple options.

**Table 1. Study Participation**

Participation by grade level & school type	K-5	Middle School	High School	Public Boundary	Public Charter	Public Magnets*	Private
Participation by site							
<b>Washington, DC (N=8)</b>	5	2	1	6	5	x	6
<b>Milwaukee, WI (N=7)</b>	1	5	1	5	0	5	3
<b>Indianapolis, IN (N=8)</b>	5	3	1	6	7	4	3
<b>TOTALS (N=23)</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>12</b>

\*Milwaukee has specialty schools, not magnets; DC parents did not refer to magnet schools.

### **Profiles of Study Participants**

Study participants in all three cities offered considerable diversity, in age, family composition, and occupation. Six out of the seven Milwaukee participants are female, and all are African American. They range in age from 26 to 50, with three participants in their 30s and two in their 40s. Four of the participants are single parents, and the other three have two-parent households. The number of children in the households ranges from one to seven. Three of the single parents have just one child, although one of them has served as a foster parent to many children in the past. Children in the families range from age 2 to age 20. All participants work at least part-time, and three of the seven are self-employed. Their businesses include an in-home daycare, cosmetology, and housekeeping. Among those who are not self-employed are a home health aid, a consultant with an accounting technology firm, a special education teacher in the Milwaukee Public Schools, and a security guard.

Washington, D.C. study participants have a variety of backgrounds, household make-ups, and school experiences. All participants are female and African American. They ranged in age from early twenties to early sixties, with a cluster in their mid to late thirties. Six of the parents live in two-parent households and two are single-mothers. Participants' children rang in age from 3 months to 23 years old, with the age of their children dramatically affecting their perception of the school experience. One participant was in the process of choosing a preschool, one of finding a place for her second grader, two were finding a 6<sup>th</sup> grade location and two looking for a 7<sup>th</sup> grade, while one was choosing a high school. All of the participants have worked outside the home, though at the time of the interviews one was on maternity leave and one was just beginning a new job. Several participants worked in government positions at various agencies such as the Postal Service or Transportation Security Administration. Three participants worked in some capacity in education or schools, and two worked in healthcare. Seven of eight participants live in the District of Columbia and came from three separate Wards.

Four of the Indianapolis participants are in the Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) district, which includes the neighborhoods closest to the inner city; four live in one of the surrounding townships. In 1970, as part of Unigov system, the city of Indianapolis consolidated city-county government but kept inner city and generally more affluent perimeter or township schools and services separate. Recent changes in policies have expanded school choice, allowing IPS parents to cross boundaries and send their children to township schools, where space is available. Among the Indianapolis participants were two office administrators from a local university—one in an academic department and another from the medical school; a geographic information analyst, also in the health field; an IT specialist; a coach for a community organizing group; and three stay-at-home mothers, one who volunteers frequently at a cooperative day care center, and another who is not currently working because she devotes time to parent groups at her daughter's school, one of the IPS takeover high schools. Two are single parents; one participant is the adoptive parent of a kindergarten-aged daughter from Ethiopia. Seven of the eight are female. One participant is African American, one White/Hispanic, and the rest, white. They range in age from their mid-twenties to late-forties; their children's ages ranged from 3½ to 15.

Table 2 in Appendix A includes additional information on the composition of the samples in each of the three cities (see p. 28).

### Limitations Based on the Sample Selection

One of the goals of the study was to understand how parents use digital media technology in their school decision-making process—and how they might use additional features that take advantage of their ready access to mobile technology or reliance on social media. Parents' responses to recruitment efforts via email confirmed basic technology use, but to further ensure that our samples included parents with sufficient access and comfort to routinely gather information on schools, we included a set of technology-related questions in our screener surveys, asking, for example, whether or not they had a smartphone.

Although our samples included parents from lower-income areas of all three cities, the need to include digital media technology users in our sample may have excluded parents from the lowest end of the income bracket. We did not include more intrusive questions about family income levels in the screener survey, and the tight timeframe for recruitment did not allow us to interview parents beforehand or add participants to ensure that they represented the full spectrum of income brackets.

### Study Methods

The ethnographic study, conducted from February through March, 2012, consisted of two, hour-long, individual interviews with parents and final focus groups in each city. (See the Appendix B, pp. 29-33), for all interview and focus group protocols.)

**Interview 1:** The first interviews, one-on-one and relatively unstructured, focused on how parents use technology, and how they use technology to make important decisions, including choosing a school for their child. To gain this basic understanding of their relationship with technology, we asked parents about the technologies they had access to and used routinely, at home and at work; the amount of time spent using technology daily; and the likelihood that they would shop online or use advanced search features.

**Interview 2:** During the second interviews, we talked in more detail about what school information parents were looking for, where they sought or found it, what sources or resources they found most helpful and reliable, and what they were not able to find or what left them with additional questions.

**Focus Groups:** After two sets of individual interviews, we brought parents in each site together for a final group discussion. All seven Milwaukee parents attended a single focus group; due to scheduling challenges, we held two smaller focus groups in both Washington, D.C., and Indianapolis.

During the focus groups, we followed up on questions posed during the interviews, or needs and issues related to decision-making that emerged during previous conversations. We also asked parents to provide feedback on the Chooser and the GreatSchools.org website. The focus groups were scheduled for one hour; two of the groups ran long, to close to two hours, because parents were eager to share their views and talk with each other about their school options and choices.

### Organization of the Report

Following a list of key findings, the discussion begins, in Section 1, with a description of parents' technology use, tools, and habits, including their use of social media. Here and elsewhere in the report are vignettes, in shaded sidebars, that share stories related to parents' technology use and school choice experiences. Section 2

describes how parents go about choosing a school for their children, including the key data points and information needs in their decision-making process, and the role of intermediary organizations. Section 3 reports findings on how parents use technology to inform school and other decisions, noting when they turn to technology and when they rely on other sources or first-hand experience. The report's fourth section summarizes parents' feedback about GreatSchools resources, including the Choosers, the website, and other possible products and services. The report concludes, in Section 5, with a discussion of the school choice landscapes in each of the three cities, followed by conclusions and recommendations.

## Key Findings

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- The participating parents use technology comfortably, frequently, and for multiple purposes. All have a laptop or desktop computer at home, and internet access; those who work outside the home use a computer in their jobs. There was a range in reported technology use: the lowest estimates were around two hours per day; the highest, close to 14. The majority of parents have smartphones, which they use primarily for communication.
- Parents use technology to research big purchases and make modestly priced purchases and often rely on discount and coupon sites (through the web or by downloading apps on their phones). They do not typically use mobile devices for research. Most seem to prefer to use computers to browse the web, conduct searches—and find out about schools. This is due in part to small screens and browser functionality, but also to the time needed just to scroll through information and process it.
- Parents use social media, mostly Facebook, primarily to stay in touch with friends and families. Twitter was not a large part of any parents' social media network. Feedback on blogs was mixed: some parents read blogs regularly—and one is a regular contributor—but others are less interested. Participants mostly used home computers for social media, but occasionally used smartphones to check updates or pass the time.
- Currently, parents do not use social media in the school choice process. Some parents referenced school profile sites on Facebook or feeds on Twitter, but did not seem to find much valuable information there. Parents confirmed, based on their current school experiences, that these sites seemed mostly for parents who were already a part of the school and the information provided was not relevant.
- Despite the diversity in the composition of the parent groups, there were consistent patterns and preferences in how they choose schools, in both the course of their school decision-making and in the information needs that emerge along the way. The patterns were consistent within and across sites, and across school types and grade levels. As a rule, parents look for performance data as they begin the selection process, but more to make their initial group of selections. They fairly quickly seek out other information depending on family or child needs or interests. The process they described was less linear than circular, because they often cycle back through information and notes to compare data and schools.
- Parents talked at length about the need for information about school climate and culture, but generally felt that the only way to research these factors is through parent word-of-mouth and visits to the school (interviews with administrators and teachers, classroom observation, etc.). They did not think that they could get this information through “data” or technology.
- The same holds true for teacher quality—while very important to them, parents did not see how it could be measured and communicated via technology. Other than web streaming live video from inside the school's classrooms, hallways, and cafeteria—which they acknowledged as extreme and intrusive—parents were unsure how technology could be useful.

- Parents value customization in a website devoted to school data or a phone application that provides updates or alerts. Enhancements or features that allow them to customize or filter searches, save lists and notes, or download documents they could print, mark up, and adapt to their needs received the most positive responses. Parents were less enthusiastic about providing email addresses or downloading apps that would give them only general information at random intervals. Younger and more tech savvy parents were the most likely to request customized features, and several remarked that they were becoming more selective about applications and had recently jettisoned list serves to trim the information or contacts they receive through personal computers and smartphones.
- Parents are not generally aware of school-choice support from intermediary organizations. They do, however, use and trust some district- or state-level information sources. Examples include the Indiana Department of Education's Compass website, Advocates for Justice for special needs children in D.C., and the Milwaukee Public Schools District Offices, commonly referred to as the "school board." Parents also have had positive experiences and established trust with neighborhood organizations, and saw these as a potential partner or facilitator in the school choice process.
- For an intermediary organization to be helpful in filling information needs, several parents said the organization would need to be intimately connected with the schools' administrators and teachers (and willing to share frank information with parents about the schools), or a liaison between parents or parent groups and the school district or individual schools.

# Section 1.

## How Parents Use Technology

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### General Access and Use

The parents taking part in the study are very comfortable using technology. All have either a laptop or desktop home computer, and most also use a computer at work; those who do not may still use a home computer for some work-related tasks. Everybody accesses the web with a variety of devices. Other technologies include an iPod, iTouch, iPad, Kindle or Nook, and car GPS systems. There were some differences based on age: older parents often mused on the rapid changes in technology and advent of new tools; younger parents were somewhat more likely to have those tools, for example, iPads and Kindles. We did not ask parents to supply information on family income, but those who appeared to have more disposable income reported more frequent use of technology for purchases, including vacations, and entertainment.

Most parents in the study have smartphones (iPhone, BlackBerry, or Android), which they use for a variety of tasks—most often for communication, and secondarily for checking Facebook, games, entertainment, and shopping. Some use their phones for scheduling and checking news, and others do their banking exclusively online. If they are not at their computers, they may use their phones to look something up online. They use apps more than a web browser, including some location-based apps. They say they are most likely to browse, take care of business, or download a new app on their smartphones while they are waiting in line.

When asked how much time they spend using technology on a daily basis, the numbers were high: a few parents simply said “24/7.” Others estimated anywhere between 2 and 15 hours of daily technology use, both at work and at home. In the process of tallying computer time, or the number of texts they send in a given day or week, parents were often surprised by the high tallies. A fair amount of their computer time is spent web browsing—which includes looking for information on schools.

Most parents, even of middle- and high-school age children, monitor their children’s use of technology. Concerned especially about monitoring their children’s social media environment, some mentioned making phones, emails, and screen time a “privilege.” Parents like the one whose views are shared here, want their children to reflect and gain perspective on their relationship with technology.

One parent in her mid-forties discussed her **view of technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century:**

The internet wasn’t around when she was in high school and college; she used typewriters and encyclopedias to write papers. She wants her kids to understand how much things have changed, and that while technology makes those things easier, it also makes it hard to know what information to trust. CDs came out when she was an adult, and her kids don’t know about tape players and records. Now, when she says that she likes a song, her kids grab her phone and download it for her.

For the most part, she thinks easy access is good: it provides quick information and allows her and her children to stay current. But it can also be harmful—social media can be a fun way to connect, but students can say hurtful things online and it spreads so fast you can’t stop it.

Technology will change again, so it is important for her children to know the history. If they don’t know the past, they can’t see a clear future. She doesn’t want them to think that today’s technology is the best it can be. She wants them to have an appreciation for the changes that have taken place—and think that they could be the one to invent “the next best thing.”

## Parents' Use of Social Media

The majority of parents in the study have Facebook accounts, and their use of social media was generally limited to Facebook and the occasional blog; a few have limited interactions with Twitter. Those who use Facebook do so primarily to stay in touch with friends and families or share pictures. Several said their main reason for being on Facebook is to supervise their child(ren)'s use of it. Some parents participate in other social networks, such as an online mom's group or religious forum.

### A parent describes her technology rules, favorite sites, and online participation:

She has set a few rules for herself—and for her children. She does not talk on the phone while driving, and all technology must be turned off and turned in at 7pm daily.

She estimates that she spends about four hours a day using technology, looking for medical information, deals or coupons, Skyping with her sister in Ohio, researching products she'd like to purchase, and checking in with her social networks. She loves to read blogs on fashion, child-rearing, money management, and technology. She is especially drawn to blogs or social forums for moms, and has been an active member of the Café Moms social network for many years.

She's started viewing and contributing product reviews on *Expo TV*, a website of product reviews, videotaped and submitted by average consumers. She likes seeing the diverse opinions and experiences—there are often ten+ reviews per product; they last a minute or less, so she can get multiple perspectives in very little time. Explaining why she transitioned from just viewing reviews to contributing her own, she said, "I felt like it was coming from such an honest place, and I felt as if we were helping people make decisions and being the truth, as opposed to just slapping pictures in a magazine...some stuff I like and some stuff I don't, and I want to be able to share that."

Parents were split on whether they prefer phones or computers to access social networks; some use their computers to post on social networking sites, but use their phone to view others' posts. Regardless of which tool they use, they are more likely to use social networking for interacting with close friends and families than with business (or school) contacts or casual acquaintances. Parents seemed to think of social media as a pastime and personal activity—less than a source of information and interaction for important decisions.

Many also mentioned changing social media habits, such as trying to constrain the amount of time they spend on social media or limiting their interactions to family only. Parents sometimes seemed hesitant to say that they spend a lot of time on social media, but would casually mention getting drawn in and losing an hour or two. It is possible that, like parents' shock at how much time they spend online, a tally of social media time would show unexpectedly high levels. While parents were open about using social media to communicate, and liked it for maintaining relationships, they were adamant about not wanting it to be a business connection or another advertising medium (as their emails have become).

There was a general sense that parents want to protect themselves from advertisements and spam, which in part explains why social media use trails general technology use and why several parents choose not to use Facebook to connect with businesses, schools, or other formal organizations. The same held true for cell phone numbers. Many parents do not give out cell phone numbers to businesses who request it, and do not choose to receive coupons or other notifications via text (with the exception of their personal bank account). Several parents noted that their

email accounts have become so bogged down with advertisements that they are unable to find emails they want or need to read; they don't want the same thing to happen to their social media accounts or cell phones.

## Section 2.

# How Parents Use Technology to Make Decisions

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### Technology of Choice

The parents in our sample use technology to research decisions and make modestly priced purchases—clothes, shoes, books, music. Parents also rely on discount and coupon sites (through the web or by downloading apps). These sites and apps at times push parents to make a purchase that they may already make, but guide them to the time and place of an exact purchase—e.g., a mom may go to buy a new kind of sandwich because she gets a mobile coupon. Participants in all three sites also use technology to *research* big decisions, such as a car purchase, and engage in comparison shopping—but in actually making a purchase or decision they also want the in-person experience, the “test drive.”

Although parents use mobile devices for many things, they don’t typically use them for research. Most seem to prefer to use computers to browse the web, conduct searches—and find out about schools. This is due in part to small screens and browser functionality, but also to the time needed just to scroll through information and process it. Parents reported using smartphones to research small decisions such as where to eat or to find a store nearby.

Participants described a loop of research in which they access multiple sources of information, compare results, and answer successive questions that arise in the process. When it comes to choosing schools, parents say they become “sticklers for details.” They often spent time comparing small details and reading reviews. In researching purchases or schools parents said they read multiple reviews to look for similar positives or negatives, only when multiple people confirmed the opinions did parents trust the information.

Parents access available information via technology. They then seek out information they cannot find online and confirm opinions offline. Parents use the GreatSchools website, often in tandem with a district website. Parents appreciate being able to access school websites, though find that only a few ended up being really useful and relevant. Parents noted that some school websites are placeholders or there because the school “needed” a website. Some parents also said they have accessed school neighborhood statistics online via police records to find crime statistics or other information from neighborhood homeowners’ associations. A few talked about trying to look up all the programs a school offered to independently figure out what they are and how they might affect the child. Others mentioned looking up the school on discussion boards or question sites, to see if it had previously been a topic of conversation.

#### There is **no substitute for experience**:

As parents explored the various ways they use technology to research school options, they often noted that there is no substitute for visiting schools and meeting with administrators and teachers. This approach was often touted as the most effective means of learning about school climate and culture. However, even with this step, many parents shared a belief that it is impossible to really know what a school is like until one has a child attending the school. This may be why many of the parents who were interviewed had moved students from one school to another mid-year or between school years—some more than once. Other parents struggled with making time to visit all the schools during the day and felt that the schools did not always welcome the visits. It was also sometimes hard to schedule meetings with administrators and teachers during a visit, which makes the visit less useful.

As noted above, parents talked at length about the need for information about school climate and culture and teacher quality, but did not think this could be easily quantified or that they could get this information through formal means.

### **Technology vs. Personal or Paper-Based Resources**

Parents' use of technology for making decisions holds true for school decisions as well: while parents seek out a lot of information online, they want an actual school visit or tour, and often a conversation or confirmation with friends or other school parents. Some consult the data first, then supplement it with personal reviews; others start with the more personal reviews, then see if opinions are confirmed by data.

Even if parents do their research online, many still print particular school facts, articles, and other information they want to annotate. Parents also want paper copies of key documents: one Indy parent had printed "a 2-foot stack" of information about the takeover process, while a D.C. parent keeps several binders full of school information. Another Indy parent printed a copy of the new Chooser as soon as she found it online. Parents in Milwaukee often use both the Chooser and the MPS School Directory documents for side-by-side comparisons of information about MPS schools – they then turn to the GreatSchools website to more closely evaluate those schools under consideration.

Parents are accustomed to seeking out online reviews—for restaurants, books, shoes—and say they like online reviews or feedback from "people who have kids in various schools." Some still say they want to talk to people in person, sometimes because they feel that published reviews are biased in one direction or the other—either they are from those who are very happy with their schools, or they are posted by the "discontents." Parents also want the opportunity to follow up on a review to ask additional questions.

In all three sites, parents seemed to seek out or rely more on school data when considering public school options. This is likely due to the fact that public school data is more readily available, but it may also be that some private schools' reputations are more established, and in some cases known as academically strong, so parents rely on reputation. D.C. parents shared concerns about the lack of data on private schools and the need to rely on reputations, since it seems like there was no way to compare newer charter schools with historically strong private schools. Tours and personal experiences may be an important factor in charters and magnet schools because they offer alternative approaches and environments. Several parents suggested that schools make broader use of short videos, and emphasized that student-generated content is of greater interest to them than videos produced by administrators or professionally-created content.

Parents frequently commented on the technology they currently use to stay in touch with their schools. They enjoy e-newsletters and appreciated when information comes via email from the school or teacher. A few parents also said they have participated in a school or class website or discussion list (listserv, GoogleGroup). Most parents said that they would enjoy access to these school sites and features in their choice process.

## Section 3.

# How Parents Choose Schools

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### **Timeframe for Choosing a School**

Most of the parents in the study began their school search well in advance—approximately a year prior to the start of school. Feedback from all three sites indicated that two factors led to an early start. In general, parents said that researching schools takes time. More than one parent, when asked about the time spent using technology, said she could sometimes spend three hours at a sitting doing school research. Parents seem to be deliberate and conscientious about the “slower-paced school decision,” looking through websites, making comparisons, talking to friends and neighbors, and visiting schools.

Some parents of younger children began even earlier—when children were, for example, three and a half—largely because they considered pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and elementary school as a continuous process. Parents felt that they need to “know things when children are three years old—five is too late.” In some cases there was more pressure, or perceived pressure, around this decision, because it would set their child on a particular path, or have long-lasting impact. It was this long-lasting impact that led some parents to rule out a designated boundary school from the start, instead of weighing other options against the boundary school.

Parents of middle-school aged children saw that choice as one with some ramifications, but some made the selection based on a child’s personality and learning needs—choosing, for example, an inquiry-based program or arts magnet—and planned to re-evaluate their secondary school choices for high school. Parents in the transition to high school also felt that while the schools are always important, the high school decision is truly preparing the child for life. Several parents mentioned that students attending some high schools are assured of getting into good colleges—and from there can do anything. The process of applying to high school also appeared to be the most competitive and involved essays, interviews, testing, and practice lessons with various schedules and levels of importance.

### **Application Deadlines**

Application deadlines were a frequent topic in interviews and focus group conversations, and these deadlines often dictate an early start, in some cases “jump starting” the process. To be considered for lotteries or out-of-area admissions, parents sometimes have to start even earlier. Once deadlines are entered on their calendars, parents work backwards, engaging in an ongoing process that includes school open houses in the winter months, and information gathering from trusted data sources and friends that continues up to the deadlines. Because schools have different or rolling admission, the process may not end with a single deadline.

Most of the Milwaukee parents indicated that school deadlines are straightforward and parents generally know the dates—especially if they have already had one child go through the process. However, several parents also noted that the application process for the highest performing schools can be lengthy and requires a series of steps. Milwaukee parents also noted that the “school board” (MPS District Headquarters) is usually very helpful if a parent goes to them for help. Washington, D.C. parents found the DCPS website and lottery reminders helpful.

Some Indianapolis parents talked about scrambling to meet deadlines, frustration with changing deadlines, and the difficulty of finding clear information on boundaries or qualifications. While parents know that policies have erased some boundaries or divisions, many are never sure of their chance of acceptance. Some Milwaukee subjects identified missed deadlines as one reason that many families send their child to a lower performing neighborhood schools instead of a higher performing school elsewhere in the district. However, parents often followed these comments with a disclaimer that “good parents” or “parents who care” are able to seek out the information that they need to work through the application process. Some also mentioned that a parent would “only miss it (a deadline) once” and learn from that lesson by making unconventional choices, then making a change with subsequent children and years.

Parents in Indianapolis and Washington, D.C. agreed that the pressure to select the right school and stay on top of different deadlines and requirements is increasing, either because school choice is becoming more and more competitive, or because the “landscape is changing so fast.”

### **Data Points and Information Parents Need at Each Step**

Parents typically said that standardized test data—the “hard facts”—was the first information they looked for, often to be reassured of an “acceptable level of performance” or learn enough to “rule certain schools out.” After that, some say, test scores are “not a deal breaker,” especially for parents looking for things such as diversity, or extra-curricular activities. Some parents felt that reading and math scores alone provide a limited view, and they would like more information about student grades and performance across subject areas. Parents were also concerned with growth and the schools’ trends as shown through test scores.

Parents in all three sites stressed the importance of diversity, and information on school diversity, in their school decision-making. Their needs varied somewhat: All the parents in the Milwaukee and D.C. sample are African American, and those who mentioned diversity typically were looking for schools with more non-black students than many schools enroll, but a few also were concerned about all-white private schools and the racial and ethnic make-up of out-of-district schools. Parents noted that a desire for diversity was one reason they made a point of visiting schools. In Indianapolis, parents looked for information about diversity when they reviewed school websites and considered out-of-boundary township schools or newly formed charters. Some parents said they want an easy way to compare school data to overall area population data or census data. Parents also considered—or said they would like to have access to—information on the ethnicity of the teaching staff.

Program offerings, including music, art, foreign languages, and core academic program structure were of interest to parents. For some of these, it was a question of whether a program is offered as a focus of the school (such as a language magnet school); in other cases, parents want to know whether courses in various subjects are offered and the frequency and quality of the courses. Parents of older children wanted information about tutoring services, test prep—things that children themselves “might not tell parents about.”

Other important information needs were details about before- and after-school childcare. While many parents want to have programs available at the school, others are content with relying on partner organizations to provide those services. A community organization, such as a Boys & Girls Club, library, or other institution nearby where children could take part in after-school activities, have access to computers, and avoid being latch-key children create a sense of community for students from a diversity of neighborhoods.

Parents talked at length about the need for information about school climate and culture—in some ways these topped their concerns, or ran close behind academic performance and program offerings—but generally felt that the only ways to research these factors is through parent word-of-mouth, visits to the school that included interviews with administrators and teachers, and classroom observation. Parents did not think data, rankings, or online reviews could portray this fully. Information such as a description of whether the school offers structured or non-structured environments were on parents’ lists as well. In Indianapolis, a related request was for a guide to the terms typically used to describe a school’s approach to teaching and learning: for example, “inquiry-based” and “multiple intelligences.”

The same holds true for teacher quality—while very important to parents, they did not see how it could be measured and communicated in any depth via technology. Some parents said they want information on teacher experience and credentials, but generally talked less about rankings or hard data on teacher quality than about school or classroom environment, or philosophy—what one parents described as “a sense of the school.” One parent asked, for example, does the school really foster a “culture of respect?” Does it have an effective anti-bullying or conflict resolution program? Another parent did not want a “rigid” school for a child who does not respond well to too much structure. Many parents acknowledged that even word-of-mouth has limitations, saying that they also take into consideration the family’s and/or students’ “track record” when weighing opinions from other parents.

Transportation was a secondary or even tertiary concern: if the school was right, parents felt they could “make it work,” and often rely on the bus or other public transportation system for older children. Others carpool with extended family or friends. Proximity to home was a priority for some parents, though less so for D.C. parents, who, with good public transportation, seemed willing to look at school options all over the city. The smaller size of D.C. also contributed to parents’ willingness to consider any school in the district. As discussed in the vignette, parents drive all over the city as a part of their commute and consider their “student commute” to be a part of living in the city. In Indianapolis, a more spread-out city, parents are less likely to drive to some of the outlying township schools. In Milwaukee, flexible work schedules allowed some parents to provide transportation for their children.

#### **Location** isn’t everything...

For D.C. parents, school location is rarely the deciding factor in a long list of important things to consider. Parents mentioned time and again that they would “get them (their kids) where they needed to go.” Many were already driving their kids across town to school, some up to an hour each way, and didn’t seem to see a need to choose schools closer to home. One middle school mom pointed out that they live south of the city, but she and her husband work in the northeast and northwest: The commute means that finding a school near home is less important than finding one near one of the parents’ work.

Another mother of a two young children said that she would like it if her son could go to school near home: “When I was young that was just what you did, you walked down to school and everyone lived nearby.” This mom then acknowledged that she would not send her son to the neighborhood school because she had heard it wasn’t good and that a charter school nearby could be an option. In discussing location with D.C. parents it seemed that location was not important because the district is relatively small distance-wise and there is not always housing or jobs near the best schools. Many parents of older children also mentioned that their kids could always take a bus or the metro.

### **The Role of Local Institutions and Partner Organizations**

Parents felt that a local organization could potentially help them navigate the public, charter, and private school systems and answer specific questions about individual schools, such as who are known as good teachers or whether there are active parent groups. When asked what kind of organization could fill that role, parents felt that it was important that the organization be one that they already know and trust. Parents already trust and utilize some official sources, such as the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) or the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) Compass; Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) parents noted that the “school board” (MPD District Headquarters) is usually very helpful if a parent goes to them for help. Thus, the most obvious suggestions were those most closely connected with the local public education systems.

The parents in the sample did not seem to be aware of a local GreatSchools presence, or rely heavily on partner organizations for information about schools or for general services. Those parents participating in our Washington and Milwaukee interviews spoke highly of the Chooser, but had not interacted with the organization, though they may have gathered information at a school fair. One Indianapolis parent, with a child in a takeover school, is familiar with Stand for Children and has had a positive experience. They do not rely on institutions for access to technology, so there was no discernible impact or involvement of intermediary organizations in their use of digital media technology.

The criteria for an intermediary organization are that they not advocate for particular schools or school sectors, and that they have up-to-date information and school expertise. According to one parent, “I need someone who’s more informed than I am to tell me what to do.” In general, parents seemed to trust intermediary organizations.

When we asked in general about local service organizations or public institutions—e.g., a library—as a general source for school information and support in making choices, parents seemed to think they would enjoy and feel comfortable attending school fairs or information sessions sponsored by such organizations, but this was largely hypothetical; parents had not turned to these institutions for information or advice. Several parents said that it would be a good resource for less-informed and low-income parents, who had not already done extensive background research on schools. One Milwaukee parent suggested that a local organization could promote its services at the public assistance office or on billboards in low-income communities. As an alternative source or support agency, some Indianapolis parents suggested more local, familiar groups, such as a neighborhood association or a community organizers group, with whom they thought there might be a “different conversation.”

## Section 4.

# How Parents Use—or Might Use—GreatSchools Resources

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As part of the final focus groups, the research team discussed the GreatSchools website and school Chooser—a resource new to Indianapolis parents—and other tools that might be available through GreatSchools in the future.

### **GreatSchools Local Chooser**

During interviews in Washington, D.C., parents referred to the Chooser as their “Bible,” indicating that it was an indispensable part of their information gathering about schools. Reviewing the new Indianapolis Chooser for the first time, parents agreed that it could be a very valuable tool. They specifically mentioned the scripts or questions suggested for school visits, and the information on the new voucher program and school tuition tax credits—both of which had been a source of confusion among Indianapolis parents. Parents liked the “quick glance” data included in the Chooser, but several noted that they would likely then go online to dig deeper into the test score metrics.

In Milwaukee, parents said they often compare the Chooser with the School Directory published by Milwaukee public schools. While some of the information overlaps, both have unique information that, combined, gives a fuller set of information for each MPS school. They appreciate the Chooser because it includes other area schools, as well. The Indianapolis parents who had previously relied on the Indiana Department of Education’s Compass website looked forward to seeing how the two sources compare as they scour through performance data.

Some parents mentioned that it helped their children engage in the process—those who don’t have the concentration or understanding to find the information online can understand the star system and look for interesting schools in the Chooser. Parents also noted that they would check their searches using the Chooser by looking back to be sure they hadn’t missed any schools they should be considering.

Many parents talked of extensively annotating and marking their Chooser. Indianapolis parents were eager to have a customized Chooser: Because the townships cover a large area circling the city, stretching in some cases 15 miles from the city center, parents tend to focus on only one or two townships nearest to their neighborhoods. For that reason, wanted to be able to omit the many pages covering townships or schools not under consideration. Since the local program in Indianapolis was just getting underway, participants were not aware of partner organizations where they could find a Chooser; considering the option to download the pdf, some worried that, at 30mgs, it might be too large a download for their slow modems or internet speeds.

### **GreatSchools.org**

A portion of the focus groups also included a quick review of the GreatSchools.org website. Again, parents had positive comments about the detailed school data available on the site. They offered several recommendations for enhancing the site that focused on issues of customizability. Many of the suggestions for site enhancements were actually features that already exist on the site—parents seemed to know how to access the specific school data, but did not seem to have spent much time browsing the other content on the site. When some of these

features were pointed out to them, parents said things like, “Wow—I’ve never even seen that,” or “I don’t think I would have noticed that.”

These are busy parents, often looking for specific information, and some found more on the site than they needed. These are also conscientious parents, but several felt that too much work was required up front to get what they want at the end. Some noted that there are too many clicks required for a basic search, while others talked at length about wanting more filtering options. While participants thought some parents might visit the site in search of tips and study resources, most did not feel they needed information on parenting. They realize that advertisements pay for the site, but some found them distracting, and felt that all the non-school performance data made the site load much more slowly. None of the parents who participated in the study are considering a move or purchase of a home, so many found the home-buying information to be an additional distraction.

### **Potential New Products and Services**

During the final focus groups, study participants also responded to features provided by GreatSchools as potential enhancements to the resources and updates they currently provide to parents.

- *Customizable school visit checklist.* Parents responded very positively to the idea of an online tool that lets them customize which questions to ask on the school visit; they also were pleased that they could print their personal checklist and take it on the visit.
- *School Visit Apps.* Parents said that a school visit app that includes checklists to help parents maximize the visit experience would be useful, and they hoped such an app would let them take notes and photos on their phone during a visit, and then keep track of that information. When we brought up the option of linking this to the online GreatSchools account, parents thought it would be nice if they could track that information online, but some were hesitant about sharing this information with others.
- *“Choice alerts” program.* As noted above, parents were somewhat wary of providing their email addresses or phone numbers, largely because of the volume of texts and emails they already receive. While they did not want to be pinged frequently, they did suggest that a system—whereby they could “opt in,” set the intervals, and specify the information they wanted—might be desirable. Parents suggested a “monthly digest” of “targeted, filtered, time-sensitive” information on specific schools. Again, the more tech savvy the parent, the less sanguine they were about alerts.
- *Email notifications when new user-generated content or data (reviews, photos, etc) is uploaded on a specific school’s profile.* Parents on the whole did not want random notifications; some noted that if they could be assured that information on the website is updated regularly they would visit it more frequently.
- *Short Informational Videos.* Parents recommended short videos that GreatSchools hosts online to teach people what to look for on a school visit, or that describe different school models (Montessori, etc.); they also had positive responses to the possibility of videos produced by and about individual schools to share information about school programs, teachers, climate, culture, achievements, or other factors often identified by participants as hard to learn about through data alone. Some parents were particularly interested in student-generated content. Some also noted that videos would be a good way to introduce

children to schools—especially young children who may be overwhelmed by visits, especially multiple visits, but could profit from a virtual tour and a view of the school before the first day.

- *Help Interpreting School Information.* Parents often noted difficulties in making sense of the information that is provided through the school, district, and GreatSchools websites. They wanted more information about how to interpret test scores and other school performance data. Some suggested using print, video, and face-to-face training and coaching to help parents wrestle with what can be very confusing, and sometimes conflicting, information.

## Section 5.

# Site Profiles and the Local Choice Landscape

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Conversations with parents revealed marked similarities in how they use technology, how they go about selecting schools, and what they feel they need to make informed decisions. What makes these similarities even more striking are the contrasts in the environments in which parents are making these decisions.

### ***Milwaukee, Wisconsin***

Milwaukee parents seem happy, not only with the information provided to them but also with their school options. Unlike the other two groups, they did not express a lot of anxiety about choosing a school, and some indicated that it was actually fun to look at different schools and make a decision. The parents also see the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) as a good partner in the school choice process. This may be due, at least in part, to the long history of school choice that has existed in Milwaukee (Chapter 220 was established in 1976). School selection is seen as an annual event—even if a parent is happy with the current school, the options seem to be reassessed each year. None of the parents in the sample indicated that his/her child had NOT gotten into the school of choice, and there was a general sense that backup choices were pretty good, in the event that a child did not get into the first choice school. Finally, only one of the parents in the Milwaukee sample had just one young child (a kindergartener), and all of the others had been through this process multiple years. In other words, school choice in Milwaukee does not seem to be a one-time event, but a continual process of assessment and reevaluation.

Though they rely to some extent on personal networks and contacts, Milwaukee parents also turn to the School Board for information, and feel comfortable going to the central office for information and assistance. They find the MPS data management system up-to-date, and see it as a reliable, neutral, and helpful source.

Milwaukee parents considering private schools did express interest in greater availability of data. They are more likely to base their decision on school reputation and experience during tours or open houses than parents of students exploring public school options only. A couple of the parents questioned the quality of some of the highly-regarded private schools, and felt that some of the positive reputations may be unwarranted. Several parents also discussed concerns about racism at the private schools.

While parents seemed to believe that choosing schools from within MPS is manageable, many also expressed confusion and skepticism about the search for schools outside of MPS. There was clear confusion around qualifications, application processes, and deadlines for both Chapter 220 (for inter-district transfer) and Choice vouchers (public vouchers for private school tuition) schools. One parent said that while she believes that the deadline for Chapter 220 school applications is February, she thinks the spots fill much earlier than that. Another

#### **A Milwaukee teacher's perspective on switching schools:**

This parent, also a teacher, said she is generally hesitant to move her children from one school to another—even though she is somewhat unhappy with her youngest child's current school. She explained her dilemma, saying, "you never really know how good a school is until you're actually in it. Because when you come to visit a school, everything could look great that day...it could be great this day or it could be the worst day ever, you just don't really know."

parent mentioned that the suburban schools seem to be withdrawing support for the program and decreasing the number of available seats.

The Choice vouchers were of even greater concern, as each individual school selects their own application window (from a list of predefined options). One of the parents shared her experience using a Choice voucher to send her son to a mostly white Catholic school. Her nephew, also a Choice voucher recipient, attended the school as well. She expressed concern that her son and nephew were stigmatized, and she ultimately pulled both children from the school mid-year. Another parent in the room whose son currently attends a Lutheran school in Milwaukee said that it may not have been the voucher that caused the stigma; it could have been the fact that both boys are African American. She and her family earn too much money to be eligible for Choice vouchers, but her son, also African American, had difficulty at a Catholic school in Milwaukee prior to moving to his current school, and she continues to have race-related concerns about his current school.

### **Washington, D.C.**

Washington, D.C. parents felt that choosing a school was very stressful, largely because of the very competitive process and all that was at stake if their careful selection process did not earn their children a place in their school of choice. The process of organizing different application or scholarship deadlines, then waiting to hear the results of the lotteries and selection committees, often left parents and students in limbo for months. In D.C., students

#### **Two philosophies when faced with troubles at school:**

One set of parents seemed to think that if something wasn't working at school, be it the administration or the teachers, they would just go to a new school. "If I don't like it, I'll just move on," explained one parent. Of the opposite belief were parents who felt some loyalty to their school of choice. These were not neighborhood schools, but there was the sense that once you made your decision on the best school that you should stay there. These parents were deeply involved with the Parent Teacher Association at their schools and wanted to work to make the school even better. The latter group seemed to stress and fret their initial school choice decision and other middle or secondary school decisions, since they would likely stick with that choice.

often do not get into their first, second, or even third choice schools. For the most competitive schools, students apply to seven or eight schools, and have to complete all the documentation and processes for each.

Between the first and second round of individual interviews, parents found out what schools their students had been accepted to, so we had the unique experience of hearing not only about the ongoing process but also the results. Some parents were left with many good options, but, for others, there was uncertainty as to the next steps—and what to do if they were left without acceptance to any school. Even after acceptance, parents struggled to determine financial aid and make a final decision. In one case, a child was completing the prep work for three different schools (a public magnet, private, and charter school), each requiring after school or weekend tutoring and assignments. Parents who had not found a school struggled to find methods of backdoor admission, determine their likelihood of acceptance off the waitlist; in one situation, the parent decided to keep the child out of preschool for another year.

The District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) parents were very positive about GreatSchools, and more than once referenced the Chooser as their "Bible." Although they do not entirely trust DCPS and the statistics information from the website, they do think that GreatSchools website is a good source of information. They discussed

a system of using the Chooser to narrow down schools, then going to the website to find out more details and finally verifying information through the DCPS website. Often parents talked about continuously going back to the GreatSchools website after school visits or talking to friends, to gather more data or confirm their suspicions.

## **Indianapolis, Indiana**

The Indianapolis parents in our sample are tuned into changes in school choice and positive about their options: they are happy they can now cross districts, between the Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) and surrounding township schools, and pleased with the new magnet and charter options. They rely on news sources to keep abreast of changes, including the local newspaper, *The Indianapolis Star*, also available online. Those who have visited the IDOE Compass website find it to be full of useful information, in a “fairly simplified, visual” form.

In Indianapolis, views on **school takeovers**:

The parent of a daughter who attends—and will continue to attend—one of the 2 IPS high schools recently taken over by a national charter organization was one of many parents who never saw it coming. Puzzled by why a school where her daughter was “thriving” would be labeled “failing,” she set about learning all she could. She asked for a meeting with the IPS Superintendent and the Charters USA representative. She canvassed teachers about their needs and intentions, and demanded to know what was happening with sports. Discovering that there wasn’t a PTO, she organized one, and urged other parents to get involved. Now a recognized activist, she has been contacted by Stand for Children to join in their efforts to help parents wade through school information. She’s pleased at where things now stand, convinced that the school will recover and that the takeover group is a true “advocate for children.”

A parent of a younger child slated to eventually attend the other takeover high school has a very different view of the situation: parents in her neighborhood are not comforted by recent developments. For reasons that aren’t entirely clear, representatives from the takeover group seem not to be sharing information or working with parent and teacher groups. These parents don’t have a sense that the children’s interests are at the heart of these changes.

Though they applaud the choices, parents are confused about what’s allowed in crossing boundaries and attending magnets. Some parents feel the anxiety of choosing the “right” school. Some are unclear about vouchers, though those who had seen the Chooser appreciated that it clearly explained the new system and eligibility requirements.

Parents want to know more about the groups taking over failing schools: a parent whose daughter goes to a takeover school—who opted to stay there after researching options—feels they were “blind-sided” by the process and really need to understand what a takeover means. Parents also alluded to a “lot of confusion” about the “numbers of charters opening up.” They see the “marketing and ad campaigns,” “signs popping up” for charters, for IPS magnets, for private schools, which make it seem like “they’re competing for kids.”

Interestingly, younger parents tend to see competition as a good thing, something that would make schools realize that they couldn’t just assume they would have full enrollments: they needed to maintain high levels of performance, keep web sites up-to-date and geared toward prospective families, and reach out to those families. One parent suggested that K-12 schools “follow the college market,” sending information to parents and actively encouraging them to consider an application for enrollment. Another parent said that schools should provide “virtual tours” for students and parents, much like hotels provide online.

Parents of older children see a downside to the

competitiveness: they did not view themselves as customers, schools as businesses, and their children as “commodities.” They worried, too, that dollars were being spent on advertising that should go to ensuring high-quality schools.

All this, along with the new statewide school grading system, talk of a trend toward “privatizing” schools, makes school choice a charged and very political issue in Indianapolis. Some parents are wary of those involved in the process, wondering if they “have their own agenda.” They are eager to have someone “who’s really reporting...who’s doing the investigative work,” and want to be reassured that they have access to “unbiased” information.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

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Our conversations with parents confirmed that they use technology in their daily lives and in their school decision making, and have fairly consistent habits or preferences in what tools and sources they turn to: they typically use mobile devices for communication and quick decisions or responses. They are more likely to use personal computers when posting on social networking sites, reading extended blogs—and engaging in thoughtful, time-consuming research on schools. Parents look to the internet to find hard data—on, for example, school accountability, enrollment figures, or diversity in the student population. Several parents had used the GreatSchools.org website, or a local or state website devoted to school data, and had either used or looked forward to using a Chooser they could mark up for future reference.

For school information they consider to be more subjective and nuanced, such as teacher quality or school climate and culture, parents are uncertain about how reliable or compelling ratings would be. Several parents did, however, ask for tools to help them interpret the terms educators use in describing these aspects of schools. To actually learn about teachers and school culture, they currently rely on friends or other parents and their own impressions, formed from school visits. That said, they know that a visit is just a snapshot and may not give them a detailed picture of the school, and that teachers, other parents, or even like-minded friends may not see or value the same things they would.

Although they have favorable views of local organizations based on personal experience or general reputation—libraries, local non-profits, school boards—and some awareness of recent activities of school-oriented groups (such as Stand for Children or the Mind Trust in Indianapolis), parents do not rely on intermediary organizations as a matter of course.

Parents did, however, identify some gaps or wish lists for making confident, informed decisions about schools. In many cases their comments add to or converge with the services under development or consideration by GreatSchools. Those recommendations, along with those from the research team, also point to ways to balance the online content delivery and on-the-ground support.

### **Online/Technology Enhancements**

- Information from principals, videos, photos, and other information that give parents a picture of the school would be welcome. Some parents also noted that information authored by the school personnel might not be entirely objective or representative, and suggested they be supplemented by:
  - reviews in which prospective parents shared their school visit experiences, perhaps in response to prompts about specific features or activities, such as how much time children were in their seats, and how free they were to move around the classroom; whether there were books and other reading materials freely available to students; and how the teacher interacted with students and how they interacted with each other. (Parents were not sure whether they would be willing to share their own photos or videos.)
  - Streamed video that could give parents a view of the above.
  - Student produced videos or reviews. Parents liked the idea of hearing from currently enrolled

students, and noted that viewing or reading students' feedback would be a good way to engage their own children in the school choice process.

- Teacher bios and credentials, and teachers' personal web pages, if available.
- Parents want a high degree of customization in interacting with any website (or phone application), and were perhaps most excited about any enhancements or features that allowed them to customize their searches and save their lists and notes. The ability to filter search results was extremely important for parents in their search process, including expanded filtering by multiple aspects such as stars, proximity, specific grade level, extra-curricular options, and programmatic foci. They also suggested an easy-to-use, personalized scheduling tool: a resource that “takes care of itself—and includes due dates for applications, and a link to school application calendar.”
- A major concern of some parents was the safety of the school neighborhood. They suggested that:
  - crime stats be available as part of the school information;
  - the website include a link to a source where they could review stats or even call to get updates on neighborhood safety; or
  - GreatSchools invite feedback on safety and neighborhood as part of the posted parent reviews.
- Parents in all three sites like the idea of having links on the GreatSchools website to other school data, or the source of school data, such as the DCPS site or IDOE Compass site.
- Comparative data is also valuable, and those parents looking across options noticed the difference in the availability of information—and the fact that private schools typically do not report performance data. They like the idea of more finely-tuned comparisons; in addition to making some comparisons themselves by looking at various data sources, they would also appreciate the guidance of a local resource person with school expertise (see intermediary organization section below).
- A common comment was that school information sites are not “specific enough.” Parents seem to want very specific facts about, for example, the sports opportunities for students, or not just whether a school offers a second language but how it is taught. They would welcome information that drills down beyond a mission statement or course listing: for example, if schools describe themselves as having a language immersion program, parents want to know what that entails and offers students. Parents also generally agreed that school websites should be a go-to source for such information, but found that they are often not up-to-date.
- Parents suggested that they need accurate, regularly updated information—and some were troubled by the fact that data sources did not jibe, or that sometimes the data are reported in different ways. For example, some parents felt that the more detailed information about schools is often out-of-date or inaccurate. Indianapolis parents pointed out that the current information on the IPS takeover schools does not let parents know that certain schools are now being operated by Charter Schools USA. Other parents noted that both the GreatSchools website and/or school websites may list extracurricular activities that are not actually available at the school. In general, parents felt that, rather than devoting time to apps that would provide updates, a better plan would be to keep the data and other information on the website current.

- Study parents were somewhat reluctant to supply email addresses or agree that social media would be their conduit of choice for school information. However, those parents who have already enrolled their children in school or have previous, positive experiences with school communication described tools that work well for them. Some may be helpful for prospective parents as well. As GreatSchools requests updates for the website, and information that portrays school climate and culture, they could, for example, ask principals to provide examples of these or a checklist of which alert or content delivery systems are available for parents. For parents who are fairly certain of their short-list choices and want a preview, GreatSchools could request a link where parents could sign up for an email or mailing list:
  - a class site for parents to stay connected
  - a weekly emailed newsletter and schedule from the teacher
  - tweets and citywide text messages, like those currently provided by DCPS
  - email blasts about upcoming events
  - a school-wide listserv or Google Group for communication and parent discussion
  - email blasts for time-sensitive information
  
- Although some parents had used the GreatSchools website, it did not appear that they had explored it fully. Based on reviews during the focus groups (or feedback from parents who browsed the site on their own), parents found the current GreatSchools.org website to be comprehensive, perhaps with more information than they could absorb. They would welcome the suggested worksheets, along with a set of simple, 1-page guides—printable and/or downloadable—to help them navigate through the site and their own school choice process. Among these could be:
  - a tutorial on how to interpret school data—or advice on how it can “sometimes be misinterpreted.” Parents need to translate what the school or scores are saying and how schools compare.
  - translations of “edu-speak.” Parents want to know what terms such as “inquiry-based” mean, and, more importantly, what it would look like for their child to be taught with a specific method.
  - definitions and demarcations of boundaries; in addition to the tool under development, parents wanted city-specific information about how many out-of-boundary students could be enrolled or the percentages of in- vs. out-of-boundary students in current grade levels.
  - maps, with a directional, magnifying slider and an electronic push pin, much like those on Google maps, that parents could manipulate then print.
  
- As noted in the body of this report, some parents found the advertisements, home-buying information, and parenting tips to be a distraction from their main goal in visiting the site. Some also suggested more background information on GreatSchools: although there was some name recognition, parents were not familiar with GreatSchools or its brand, and did not feel that the current homepage provides sufficient information about the organization, its mission, and the extent of the organization’s efforts and vast amount of data made available to parents.

### **On-the-Ground Support**

- When we posed the questions of the role various organizations might play, some parents suggested that their assistance would be more appropriate for parents new to a city, or new to the school choice process, who might need more basic information and hand-holding. Parents who had completed or were well along in their school choice process were uncertain whether local organizations would have the depth of

knowledge to answer the questions that arose in the later stages of that process. Parents in Milwaukee had, for example, found the school board to be very helpful in informing them of the schools still receiving applications or where seats were available, but they could not tell parents whether or not those schools were a good fit for their children. What these groups might provide are contacts, suggestions for the right local resource people—“who to call”—in the school system to answer parents’ questions.

- Parents generally want to hear information from as close to the source as possible—current teachers or parents, PTO members, students. As part of its local program expansion, GreatSchools might consider inviting those with first-hand experience to school fairs, or, with their agreement, have them on-call through local organizations to answer questions, especially those about quality and culture. This service could make more targeted, in-depth information available to parents, on request.
- There was general agreement that there is not enough information on charters or private schools, or “what they do differently.” Parents commented that because many are new or the reputation protected, “all the information is positive.” They worry that some charters may be too fly-by-night, and their faculties untested, newer to teaching. Other information needs related to the fact that each private and charter school has its own application form, deadlines, and lottery—leaving parents overwhelmed in search of some consistent way to cull through and organize the information.
- While there are local charter management organizations that can provide information to parents, GreatSchools local programs could help locate sources parents could trust to provide objective information. This seems particularly important in cities where the school choice is expanding rapidly and parents are uneasy with the competition.
- If the focus groups are any indication, parents who have no prior connection, but are joined in a similar, important decision, enjoy talking to one another. Intermediary organizations need not play a direct role in these discussions, but they could play an important role in bringing parents together in community forums. The organizations involved could simply provide a familiar, convenient location—a library, for example—or draw on their skills (e.g., as a neighborhood association) in moderating discussions, distributing information, and bringing people together.
- In addition to enlisting these organizations in holding forums to share information and insights about schools, GreatSchools could also call on them to convene periodic focus groups to test new ideas. As parents contact these organizations in search of information, they could be asked if they would be willing to participate in future discussions of particular local issues, delivery mechanisms, or other school choice matters.

## Appendix A

**Table 2. Participant Demographics**

City	Race	Age	Occupation	Household Composition	Current School
Milwaukee	African American	late 30s	Home health aid, part-time	Husband and 7 children ages 2-20 (2, adopted siblings of the mother)	some public, some private
Milwaukee	African American	late 30s	Owns an in-home daycare	Husband, 2 daughters ages 7, 11	Public—highest performing school in MPS
Milwaukee	African American	late 20s	Licensed cosmetologist who works independently	Single, 6 year old daughter, very involved with her extended family	MPS—not her neighborhood school
Milwaukee	African American	Early 40s	Consultant, accounting technology consulting firm	Single, 10 year old son and 3 year old daughter	private (Lutheran school)
Milwaukee	African American	Early 50s	Housekeeper	Husband, 14 year-old daughter; adopted, has fostered many kids	public
Milwaukee	African American	Early 30s	Security guard; trying to become a published poet	Single, 14 year old daughter, 2 sisters	public, considering move to private
Milwaukee	African American	Early 40s	Special education teacher in MPS	Single, 2 daughters 14 and 18	public
District of Columbia	African American	Early 60s	Postal Service - Office Employee	Husband, 13 year old daughter	public, out of area and looking at private & magnet, all highest performing.
District of Columbia	African American	Late 30s	Transportation Security Administration- Office Employee	Husband, 8 year old son and two daughters	public, out of area and looking to keep younger in same school set.
District of Columbia	African American	Early 30s	Maternity Leave from Technology sector	Husband, 4 year old girl and two younger brothers	new in school looking at public, out of area & charter
District of Columbia	African American	Early 20s	Beginning Employment with an Education Non-Profit	Single, 8 year old daughter	private, looking to move to highest performing magnet or private with scholarship
District of Columbia	African American	Late 30s	Volunteer/ Part-time work with school and P.T.A.	Single, 9 year old daughter and two seven year old sons	public
District of Columbia	African American	Early 40s	Contract work with Education Consultant	Husband, 6 year old son	public, looking at charter & public
District of Columbia	African American	Late 40s	Electronic Billing at Hospital	Husband, 12 year old daughter, 2 older step sons	public, looking for spec. ed. programming
District of Columbia	African American	Early 30s	Nurse	Husband, 14 year old son, 13 year old daughter, and 9 year old son	public, considering charter
Indianapolis	White	Mid 30s	IT Specialist	Wife, 5-year-old son	public/pre-K magnet school this year
Indianapolis	White	Early 30s	Admin. Asst., university dept.	Husband, 4 1/2 old son, 3 year old daughter	considering public charter & magnet, & private school
Indianapolis	White	Late 30s	Stay-at-home mother	Husband, 10 year old son, 4 1/2 year old daughter	son in public magnet school; daughter accepted for K
Indianapolis	White/Hispanic	late 20s	Stay-at-home mother; volunteer, Coop Pre-School	Husband, 5 year old son, 3 year old daughter	coop pre-school/deferred decision
Indianapolis	White	Late 40s	Stay-at-home mother; active in school issues	Single, 15 year old daughter	public high school (takeover)
Indianapolis	African American	Mid 30s	Community organizing coach	Single, 10 year old daughter	private, considered transfer to public township school
Indianapolis	White	Mid 40s	GIS analyst, health field	Husband, 16 year old daughter, 14 year old son	daughter, parochial school; son, arts charter high school
Indianapolis	White	Mid 40's	Admin. Asst., medical school training/outreach	Husband, adopted 5 year old daughter	public, out of district

### **Interview Protocol 1:**

Digital media technology includes a lot of the technology we—and our children—use daily for work, school, and entertainment: computers, cell phones, DVDs, CDs, video games, the Internet, and more recent tools like iPads, eBooks, and apps that let you do everything from get directions to play games to buy a car.

1. Thinking about how digital media technology has evolved and changed rapidly over the last 20 years or so, tell me how it has affected you, personally, and your family.
2. Describe the ways you use technology in your life.
  - Probe for use: web surfing/research, social networking, email communication, mobile devices.
  - Probe for what kind and where: desktop at work, personal smart phone.
  - Probe for purposes: ie. recreation/entertainment, business, communication, researching resources and opportunities, managing household activities, etc.
  - Probe for retail sites: ie. Which sites (Costco, Amazon, Best Buy) and how do you navigate? Do you use complicated search methods?
  - Probe for travel or real estate websites: Kayak or Trulia. How do you search?
  - Probe for use of community message boards: School sites, local news
3. Overall, how much time do you spend during the average day (or week) using digital media technologies?
  - Probe: Try to separate by work, fun/entertainment, family needs/decisions (categories listed in #2)
4. How do you find out about digital media tools and resources available to you?
  - Probe for: at work, from children, from friends, from news/newspapers/ magazines/online sources.
5. Which of these sources do you rely on when trying out new tools? Or, what draws you to a new tool, or makes you want to use it?
6. Do you have a mobile phone? If so, I have a few specific questions about how and when you use it. [We may want to establish earlier whether they have a cell phone and/or computer, & if computer is at home/work/both.]
  - a. What brand/model of mobile phone do you have?
  - b. How frequently do you use your mobile phone to send and receive email?
    - i. Do you have a computer? At home? At work?
    - ii. Which do you use more often to send and receive email - your mobile phone or your computer?
    - iii. In what circumstances might you check email on your phone (i.e. while waiting in line at the grocery store; while watching TV...)
  - c. How frequently do you use your mobile phones to access the web?
    - i. Which do you use more often to access the web - your mobile phone or your computer?
    - ii. In what circumstances might you browse the web on their phones (i.e. while waiting in line at the grocery store; while watching TV...)
  - d. How frequently do you use your mobile phone to connect with social networks like Facebook and Twitter?
    - i. Which do you use more often to access social networks - your mobile phone or your computer?
    - ii. In what circumstances might you connect with social networks on their phones (i.e. while waiting in line at the grocery store; while watching TV...)
  - e. Do you download apps to your phone?
    - i. If so, which apps do you use most often?
  - f. How often do you use your mobile phone to look at a map/get directions?
    - i. Do you allow location based services on your phone?
  - g. Do you send and receive text messages on your mobile phone?
    - i. If so, how many messages do you send/receive per week?
    - ii. Do you text with your kids?
    - iii. How frequently do you choose to receive text messages from companies or organizations that they like? (i.e., retailers' messages about coupons, sales, etc.)
    - iv. Have you used your phone to make a donation to charity?

- h. Do you look for information about a school using your mobile phone? If so, what specific information are you seeking? Do you find it? Do you remember what they were doing when you looked for the information (i.e., standing in line at the grocery store, driving around a new neighborhood, watching TV...)
- 7. How have you used technology to make decisions? What kinds of decisions has technology helped you to make? How do you know what to believe or trust?
  - Probe for large and small decisions (ie, buying a car vs. choosing a restaurant)
  - Probe for sources of expertise: social networks, “experts”, blogs, official sources, etc.
- 8. What other tools or resources do you turn to when you have important decisions to make?
  - Probe for:
    - Friends or co-workers
    - Other parents from school
    - School personnel (administrators, teachers)
    - Websites
    - Online communities (blogs, chat rooms, social networks)
    - Community organizations or services (library, after-school clubs, churches)
    - Interactive websites that display data or reports on the topic.

## **Interview Protocol 2:**

Last time we spoke, we discussed tools and resources that you use when you have important decisions to make. Today we're going to talk more about one particular important decision—where to send your child to school.

**I. What kinds of information do you take into consideration when thinking about school options for your child?**

What is the most important thing to consider? Probe for:

- Standardized test scores
- Comparisons of test scores across schools and districts
- Descriptions of school curriculum and courses offered
- Descriptions of extra-curricular activities for students, like clubs, sports, arts programs, etc.
- Information about before- and after-school services (breakfast, extended day activities, homework help)
- Information on tutoring or enrichment services
- Information on bus or transportation services
- School newsletter
- Parent comments or perspectives
- Information on scholarships or vouchers

Now I want us to think about tools and resources that you may be using or may have used to help decide where to send your child to school.

**2. Which of the following tools/resources have you used to help with this important decision? (for each tool or resource, explore how it was used, how often it was used, and whether it was helpful)**

Probe for:

- Friends or co-workers
- Other parents from school
- School personnel (administrators and teachers)
- School website
- Other online site with information about school performance
- Community organizations or services (library, after-school clubs)
- School open houses and information sessions
- Interactive website where you can compare schools and performance over multiple years

**3. Have you ever sought assistance from any local organizations to help you decide what school you want your child to attend? If so, tell me about that.**

For each organization, find out:

- Organization name
- How they heard about the organization/why they decided to connect with that organization
- What kind of help they were looking for
- What kind of help they received
- Whether the information/support they received was useful
  - Probe for specific tools offered by the organization—ie, interactive website, e-newsletter, Facebook page, online videos
- What they liked about the experience
- What they didn't like about the experience
- Whether they would/have recommend/ed the organization to others

**4. Earlier in our conversation, you named several kinds of information that you use when consider school options (name them).**

- i. Which of these things were you able to learn about through personal relationships?
- ii. Which did you learn about through formal organizations?
- iii. Which did you learn the most about through technology?

**5. What do you think are the most reliable sources of information on schools?**

**6. How do you know whether to trust the information you're getting?**

**7. Do you have access to the information that you feel you need to make the right choices about your child's school? If no, what else would be helpful?**

## **Focus Group Protocol**

Thanks for taking the time, once again, to talk about choosing a school for your child. What I'd like to do first today is pose some questions to you as a group. We've touched on these individually—how you used technology to find out about schools, what information you found online vs. what you found through friends, a visit, or a local organization. Now let's talk, as a group, about what information and resources parents need to make informed decisions and where they find it.

I'd also like to get your feedback on some actual resources. Start by introducing yourself, give the ages of your kids, and what kinds of schools you are looking for.

### 1. Group Discussion of Key Questions

- a. What school information did you, or would you look for online?
  - i. Why would you look for this information online rather than, say, talking to a friend, or visiting a library, a local organization, or the schools themselves?
  - ii. What online sources were easiest to use, or seemed most reliable? What made them seem trustworthy?
  - iii. Was anything unclear, hard to interpret?
  - iv. Did the information you were looking for seem accurate, up to date?
  - v. Did you look for a second source, like a second opinion on a medical question?
  - vi. Were there things you first asked friends or local organizations about, that you eventually looked for online?
- b. What questions or conversations about schools would you use communications or digital media technology for—email, texting, phone calls, apps, etc.?
  - i. Share some examples of questions or exchanges that you emailed or texted, or examples of information that was emailed or texted to you?
  - ii. Have any of you used Facebook or other social media sites to talk about choosing schools?
  - iii. Let's talk about some other possibilities or digital tools. What about:
    - a customized school visit checklist—an online tool that lets you customize which questions to ask on the school visit, which you could then print and take on the visit.
    - a school visit app that includes checklists that help parents maximize the visit experience. These lists would let people take notes and photos on their phone during a visit, and then keep track of that information in their phone. [It also could sync to your online GreatSchools account—you could tell GS what you thought of the school or pass along photos; GS could add their user generated content to the school in question AND use your data to understand how they are approaching the school choice process (so as to better customize their experience).]
    - a “choice alerts” program, where parents would provide GreatSchools with their email and/or phone number and the names of schools they are interested in applying to, and GreatSchools would email or text them about relevant application due dates, upcoming parent events, etc.
    - an email product that sends people notifications when new user-generated content or data (reviews, photos, etc) is uploaded on a specific school's profile
    - short videos that GreatSchools hosts online that teach people what to look for on a school visit, or that describe different school models (Montessori, etc.)
    - an app that you could use if you were in the school vicinity, like a restaurant app?
- c. We've talked a little in our individual conversations about the key points in choosing a school when you need information. Let's talk a little more about the time frame of your decision-making process.
  - i. When, or how far ahead, did you start? What kinds of questions did you have as you learned more about schools?
  - ii. For what information, questions, or stage of the decision-making process is technology not as convenient, or useful?
    - Reversing the question above: were there things you first looked for online that you eventually talked to friends, school sources, or other local organizations about, that you eventually looked for online?

- Was there information that, even after you found it online, you still wanted to discuss with a friend or with someone knowledgeable about schools? What kinds of information or questions needed some follow-up?
- iii. Is there school information—or is there a stage of the decision-making process—for which you wanted a hard copy you could thumb through, mark up, etc.?
- d. To summarize what we've just been talking about: What's best? What do you need on-the-ground information and support for, and what's most convenient to have online?
    - i. To what extent does your need for information depend on access—what tools you have available, where you are, what time of day it is, etc.?
    - ii. Does the timing or the need for up-to-date information affect what sources you use(d)?
    - iii. What could an intermediary or community organization do to interpret information, put you in touch with other sources, or guide you through the school choice process? [Mention orgs. in individual sites, to check again to see if parents are familiar with them.] When in the process does their help come into play?
  - e. As you think back over your experiences: What was missing? What didn't you find, online, in a school information resource [the Chooser in DC & Milwaukee], from a personal source, or from another organization?
2. Now let's take a look at the actual resources.
    - a. When you show the Chooser, we would like for you to specifically probe on the Value Added information.
      - i. In general, it would be great if we could get a little more information around how people are interpreting/understanding the academic data. For example:
        - What does the column labeled "Growth" mean to them?
        - What do the colors in the Value Added section mean to them?
        - What they would do with the Value Added information listed? Do growth results help parents guide their decisions about what would be a good school choice for their child?
        - Are the explanations of test scores and growth clear?
        - Is it helpful to see results for test scores and growth separately for each school?
        - What they think is the most useful information in the guide in terms of evaluating schools, and
        - what additional information they would like to see that would help inform their decision about what school would be a good fit for their family.
    - b. Great Schools website: what information on the site is the most useful to them in terms of evaluating how good of a fit a school is for their family.