

Interim Report for GreatSchools-Stanford Study: The Effects of Providing Information and Support to Middle School-Choosing Families

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September 29, 2012

Motivation

With market-based school choice reform strategies becoming increasingly popular in the US, it is important to think carefully about how these initiatives should be designed and supported. Our country's recent history with school choice programs suggests they can be powerful tools for improving student achievement and other outcomes, but the mere existence of a market for school choosers cannot guarantee success.

One persistent challenge for school choice reforms is that potential school choosers might not be well informed about their options or about how to navigate the selection process. This challenge has drawn the attention of policymakers, reformers, and researchers, alike. Many states and districts have worked to improve the availability of school data, while supporting organizations like GreatSchools have helped to fill information gaps. Some recent research – most notably a study of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District – offers evidence that families make different school choices when better informed about their options.¹

Project Overview

This project involves collaboration between GreatSchools and researchers at Stanford University. We more closely examine the effects of providing school choosers with detailed information about schools and personal support as they make their choices. We consider how information and support provision affects the schools that students request and attend as well as those students' subsequent outcomes.

Families with students completing their final year (or a common transition year) of elementary school in Washington, DC, or Milwaukee during the 2010-2011 school year were the primary subjects of this portion of the study, since many of these families were choosing a middle school for the following year. Washington, DC, and Milwaukee are natural settings for this study, since they are among the most choice-friendly cities in the United States. Families in these cities have many tuition-free schooling options available via different types of intra-district choice programs, public charter schools, inter-district choice programs, and private school voucher programs. We received data with the help of the Office of the State Superintendent (DC), the DC Public Schools, and the Milwaukee Public Schools.

¹ Hastings, J. S., & Weinstein, J. M. (2008). Information, school choice, and academic achievement: Evidence from two experiments. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 123(4), 1373-1414.

Families in each city were randomly assigned to a treatment group or control group. GreatSchools then concentrated its information and support provision on treatment group families. Randomization occurred at the sending school level, such that all students in the final grade at the same elementary school would have the same treatment assignment. Any school or family that requested GreatSchools services was offered all of the available information and support regardless of that school or family’s treatment assignment.

Our treatment had both information and support components. Information came primarily through the distribution of the *DC School Chooser 2011-2012* and the *Milwaukee School Chooser 2011-2012*. These booklets, produced by GreatSchools, contain profiles of the traditional public, charter, and private schools in each city, along with suggestions for how to choose a school, details about the types of choices available in that city, and other resources (e.g., details about the GreatSchools website, which contains more comprehensive profiles of these schools). The individual school profiles in the *Choosers* vary across the two cities’ booklets, but each booklet most prominently features academic ratings, with additional information available about programs offered, location, school and class size, student demographics (in DC), reenrollment rates, school themes, and more. A sample from each city’s 2011-2012 booklet appears below. Treatment group families were encouraged to obtain additional information from the GreatSchools website and GreatSchools staff.

The information component of the treatment was supplemented by additional support offered by GreatSchools staff. GreatSchools staff members in each city initiated contact with treatment schools and offered school leaders their choices of an assortment of services. These services included on-site school selection workshops, one-on-one (or small group) counseling sessions, training of school staff to better support their school-choosing parents, and invitations to utilize other GreatSchools resources like citywide school fairs, parent hotlines, and the website and *Chooser*.

Deal Middle School: DCPS, 6-8
www.greatschools.org/washington-dc/washington/108-Deal-Middle-School/

3815 FORT DR. NW
 WASHINGTON, DC 20016, WARD 3
 SCHOOL PHONE: (202) 939-2010
 CLASSROOM HOURS:
 8:45 AM - 3:15 PM

2010 GreatSchools Academic Rating: ★★★★★


Out of Boundary Deadline:
 February 28, 2011

Languages Taught: French, Mandarin Chinese, Spanish

Extra-curricular: Chess, chorus, cooking, debate, fencing, and more

Sports: Cross country, rugby, soccer, volleyball and more

DC-CAS	2008	2009	2010	3 Year Trend
Math	77.01%	77.63%	84.12%	↑
Reading	78.59%	78.37%	83.05%	↑





 Tenleytown-AU
 Bus: 31, L1, L2, L4, M4

School size: 866 students
 Re-enrollment Rate: 100%
 Class size: 30 students/teacher
 Before care: No After care: Yes
 Uniforms: No Dress code: Yes

ELL services provided: Intensive
 Special education services provided: As needed

Diversity
 44% African American
 7% Asian / Pacific Islander
 37% Caucasian
 11% Latino / Hispanic
 X% Native American / Other

Income Level
 29% Low Income

“We are best known for our comprehensive learning program.”

Sample school profile from *DC School Chooser 2011-2012*

Roosevelt Creative Arts Middle School MPS, 6-8

www.greatschools.org/wisconsin/milwaukee/1174-Roosevelt-Creative-Arts-Middle-School/



800 W Walnut St
Milwaukee, WI 53205
Phone: (414) 267-8800

School Hours: 8:45 AM - 3:38 PM
 Transportation: Yes

School size: 814 students
 Student-teacher Ratio:
 20 students/teacher

Before care: No After care: No
 Uniforms: No Dress code: Yes

ESL/ELL Services Provided: none
 Special Education Services Provided:
 intensive

Extra-curricular: orchestra, ceramics, video/
 film production, and much more...

Sports: basketball, track

MPS Building Code: 059

Our Grads Typically Go To:
 Milwaukee High School of the Arts
 Riverside University High School
 Rufus King International School

WKCE - 8th grade	Attainment	Value Added
Reading	AVERAGE	AVERAGE
Math	AVERAGE	HIGH

Attendance Rate (above 90%) ★
 Student Return Rate (above 70%) ★



"We are best known for our
 excellence in arts & academics"

Sample school profile from *Milwaukee School Chooser 2011-2012*

Preliminary Findings

As with any randomized experiment, the effects found in this study are defined by the contrast between what the treatment group experienced and what the control group experienced. We observe somewhat different results in DC and Milwaukee, but these results are consistent with the different treatment-control contrasts in the two cities.

GreatSchools was relatively new to DC during the 2010-2011 school year (the treatment year). It was just beginning to hire a local staff on the ground in DC and build relationships with schools across the city, and it could focus that relationship-building in 2010-2011 on the schools that had been randomly assigned to our treatment group. Furthermore, the information distributed citywide to potential school choosers from sources other than GreatSchools was limited. This provided an opportunity for a sharp treatment-control contrast. The *Chooser* and GreatSchools' support services were relatively new to DC, so control group schools were unlikely to seek them out, and the information and support themselves offered significant value beyond what was already being consumed by families.

In DC, we see a meaningful, statistically significant effect on our key immediate outcome of interest: the academic rating of the middle schools that these students attended in the following year. The *DC School Chooser 2011-2012* lists an "Academic Rating" for many schools that ranges from one to five stars. This rating represents the percentage of students at that school scoring proficient or better on the 2010 District of Columbia Comprehensive Assessment System (DC-CAS). It does not incorporate any value-added information and might or might not be a good indicator of school quality. However, it is the most visually prominent feature of the *Chooser's* school profiles, as the schools with data available have one to five large stars in their profiles to reflect performance on this measure. Since the *Chooser* was the centerpiece of our information treatment – and much of our support treatment utilized the *Chooser* or drew from the same information – we expected it to be influential. It was. Treatment group students attended DCPS and public charter middle schools receiving approximately 0.21 more stars, on average, than the schools attended by control group students in our data (effect size = 0.17). This is statistically significant and represents an intent-to-treat effect,

meaning that it is averaged across all students in the study, including treatment group families that did not receive the treatment and control group families that did. The effect of treatment on the treated was likely considerably larger. We see indications that some of this effect was driven by treatment group families being more likely to send their children to five-star schools.

The treatment-control contrast was not as sharp in Milwaukee. Partly, this was due to GreatSchools having been much more established in Milwaukee in 2010-2011 than it was in DC. Although the hope in Milwaukee, like in DC, was to distribute copies of the *Chooser* only to treatment group schools – and to focus the support services on those schools – many schools that had been assigned to the control group that year had school leaders and parents who requested the services that they had known GreatSchools to provide. Furthermore, when, during our treatment year, the Milwaukee Public Schools revamped the *Directions* booklet that it provided to school-choosing families in Milwaukee, the contrast between the information distributed to treatment and control families was made duller than it might have been. There were important differences, like that the *Directions* booklet did not contain performance information (available on the MPS website). However, the gap between what was experienced, on average, between the treatment and control groups was likely smaller in Milwaukee than it was in DC.

In Milwaukee, we did not see a statistically significant treatment effect on our key immediate outcome of interest: the *Chooser* academic ratings of schools attended or requested by students. Rather than stars, the *Milwaukee School Chooser 2011-2012* uses green, yellow, and red lights to indicate high, medium, and low school performance. Middle schools with sufficient data available received up to four separate ratings: math attainment, reading attainment, math value-added, and reading value-added. We created a composite of these ratings as our primary school selection outcome measure. We do not observe statistically significant differences in the ratings of the middle schools that the treatment and control groups attended or requested. Unlike in DC, where we have data for both traditional public school students and public charter school students, we are limited to data on traditional public school students in Milwaukee. One possible explanation for the lack of a treatment effect is that there was differential attrition in our sample across the treatment and control groups, whereby there were different tendencies in the treatment and control group with respect to leaving the district for options elsewhere. We will closely examine this possibility in subsequent reports. Undoubtedly, though, part of the explanation for why we observe significant treatment effects in DC and not Milwaukee relates to the differences in the treatment-control contrast in the two cities, due partly to GreatSchools work in Milwaukee prior to our treatment year.

Upcoming Reports

As we continue to collect data for both DC and Milwaukee, we will supplement the findings reported here with subsequent findings. Most notably, we expect to have test score data from post-treatment years, which will enable us to look for longer-term academic effects of the treatment. We expect to obtain other outcome data, as well, such as data on student mobility, enabling us to examine whether better information and support during the choice process reduces the probability that a student must switch schools later on.

Ultimately, we expect to release a formal scholarly article with full discussion of the short-term and long-term effects of these treatments and what they might suggest for school choice and school choice policymaking.

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