



How do parents research and choose schools?

Parent attitudes
and behaviors
when choosing
schools, 2013

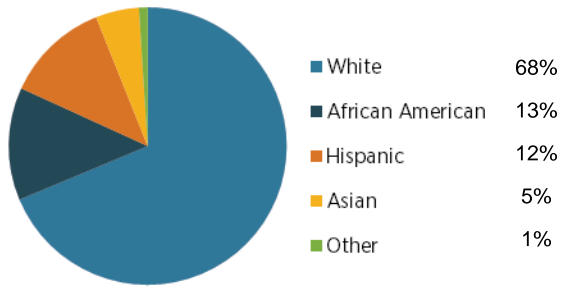
About GreatSchools



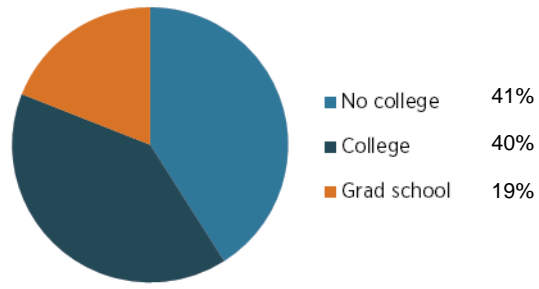
- National nonprofit founded in 1998 to inspire and guide parents to become effective champions of their children's education at home and in their communities.
- GreatSchools Local launched in 2013 to bring communities customized school guides and school choice resources.
- 200,000 profiles of preK-12 schools providing ratings and data.
- 1 million reviews helping families find schools that fit.
- Thousands of articles, worksheets, and parenting resources.

GreatSchools.org reaches 44 million annual unique visitors from diverse backgrounds¹

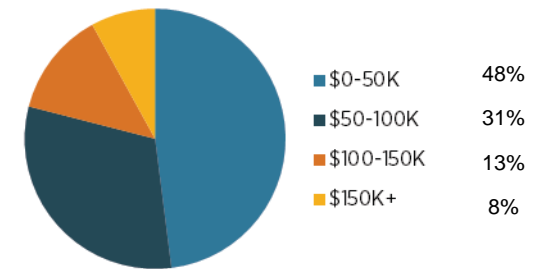
Ethnicity



Education



Income



¹Quantcast Demographics for GreatSchools.org, 2013.

Guiding questions

- Is there evidence that informing parents about their school options influences their decisions?
- Why do families research schools?
- What types of information are parents seeking?
- How do parents use and interpret school ratings?
- What is the role of “word of mouth” in parents’ school choice process?



Recent research conducted by GreatSchools and others on parent school choice attitudes and behaviors

Study Name	Conducted by	Type	Description
The Effects of Providing Information and Support to Middle School-Choosing Families, 2010 - 2012	Center for Education Policy Analysis, Stanford University*	Randomized Control Trial, DC (N=1,700)	Provided school information to school-choosing families in Washington, DC to study the impact it had on their school choices.
YouGov Survey on How Americans Assess School Quality, June - July 2013	Center for Education Policy Analysis, Stanford University*	National U.S. survey of adults (N=1,000)	Survey to understand how the presentation of school quality indicators impacts parent opinion of schools.
GreatSchools Annual Brand Tracking Survey, Oct 2013	GreatSchools	Survey of U.S. parents with kids under 18 (N=1,085)	Annual brand survey to track brand measures and school choice activities among U.S. parents.
GreatSchools Annual Customer Satisfaction Survey, Jan - Feb 2013	GreatSchools	Survey of U.S. GreatSchools users (N=735)	Annual CSAT survey to track satisfaction with GS.org, brand measures and school choice activities among GS users.
GreatSchools Ratings Survey, May 2012	GreatSchools with analysis by Peter Bergman, Columbia University*	Survey of GreatSchools users and U.S. parents (N=1,484)	Survey to evaluate how the presentation of school ratings affects the perceived quality of a school.
GreatSchools Parent Roundtable Discussions, Feb - April 2013	GreatSchools	Roundtable Discussions, DC and New Orleans, (N=12)	Qualitative research to learn how parents choose schools for their children and the challenges they face specific to each market.
One-on-one parent exploratory interviews and focus groups, Feb - April 2012	Rockman, commissioned by GreatSchools*	Parent one-on-ones and focus groups, (N=25)	Qualitative study to learn how parents choose schools for their children and the role technology plays in that process.

* Studies can be found in the GreatSchools Media Room at <http://www.greatschools.org/about/pressRoom.page>

**Is there evidence that informing
parents about their school options
influences their decisions?**

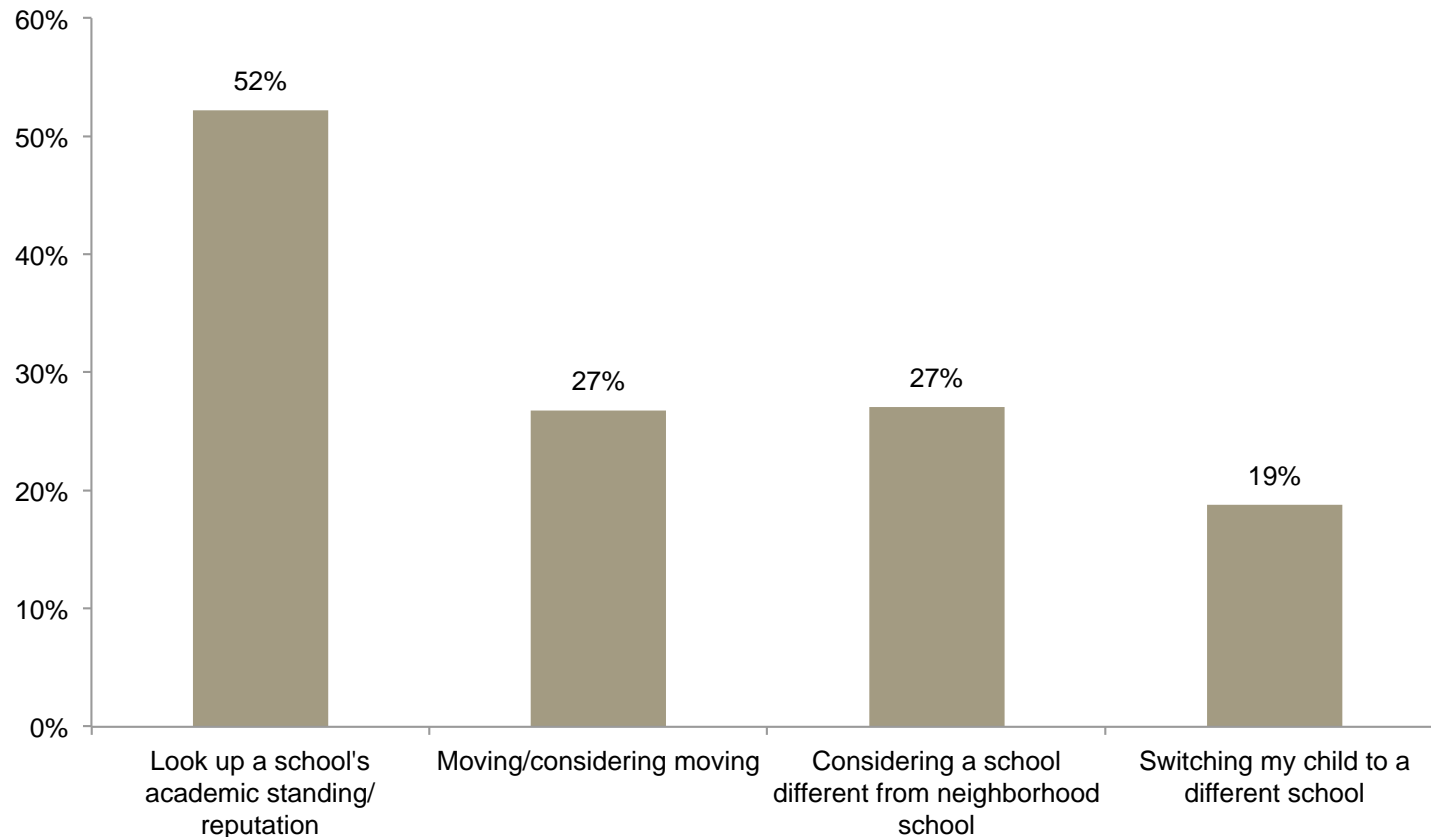
FINDING #1: When parents were provided information about their school options, they chose higher-performing schools for their children.

- A Stanford University study¹ focused on families with students completing their final year of elementary school in Washington, DC during the 2010-2011 school year (since many of these families were choosing a middle school for the following year).
- Families were randomly assigned to a treatment group or control group. The treatment group received a printed School Chooser guide with information on school options and school performance in DC, as well as GreatSchools support services, while the control group did not receive information or services (unless requested).
- Parents that received information and support enrolled their children in middle schools with higher academic ratings than did those in the control group. The effect was statistically significant and represented a meaningful difference.
- The next phase of research will compare the performance of students in treatment and control groups to see if students receiving materials actually performed higher in their chosen schools.

¹"The Effects of Providing Information and Support to Middle School-Choosing Families." 9/29/2012. Center for Education Policy Analysis, Stanford University and GreatSchools. Randomized control trial design. N = 1,700 families with 5th graders from 54 DC schools (Effect size = .17).

Why do families research schools?

FINDING #2: Parents go online to research schools when actively choosing a school, but also to more generally gather information about a school or track its progress.



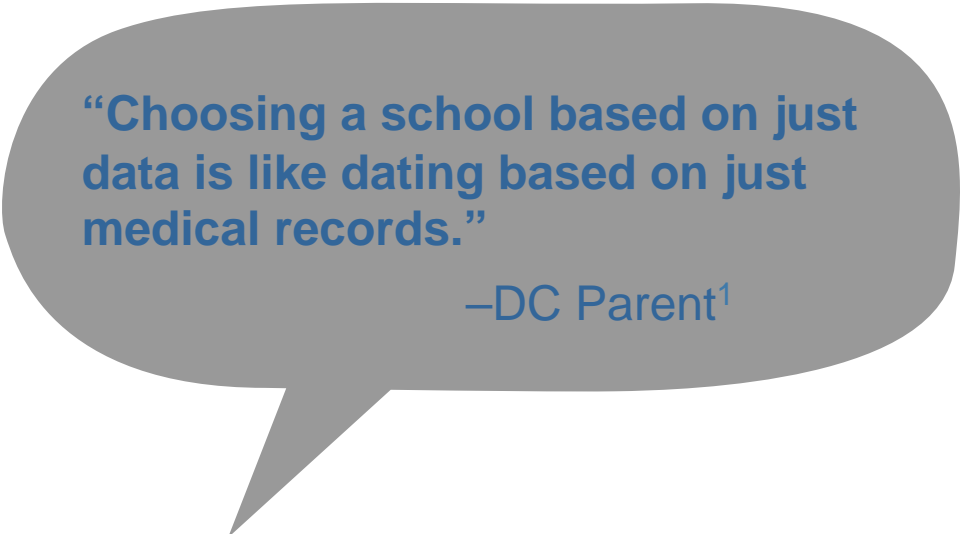
¹GreatSchools Annual Brand Tracking Survey among U.S. parent online panel. October 2013. N=314. Margin of error = ± 5.5 percentage points.
Q. Why were you researching schools (online)? Note: Respondents could select more than one option.

**What types of information are
parents seeking when researching
schools?**

FINDING #3: Parents seek information and guidance from multiple sources to inform their school choice process.

- GreatSchools commissioned an independent research firm to conduct an exploratory study¹ of how parents choose schools and the role information plays in the process. The study involved in-depth interviews and focus groups with parents in Milwaukee, Indianapolis, and Washington, DC.
- The researchers found that parents take their school decisions very seriously and seek guidance and information from multiple sources.
- Most parents follow a similar path; they start by evaluating test scores and other academic performance data. Next, they look for school information on practical matters specific to their needs, such as before- and after-school care, diversity in the student population, or extracurricular offerings.
- Parents then move in different directions to find secondary sources of information and seek insight into more subjective factors, like learning environment and teacher quality. To make a final decision about a school, parents often rely on firsthand experience.
- Parents also expressed their need for clear information about the application process, such as student eligibility and enrollment deadlines.

¹One-on-one parent exploratory interviews and focus groups, Rockman et al, commissioned by GreatSchools, Feb-April 2012. N = 25 parents of K-12 public school students in D.C., Milwaukee, and Indianapolis.



“Choosing a school based on just data is like dating based on just medical records.”

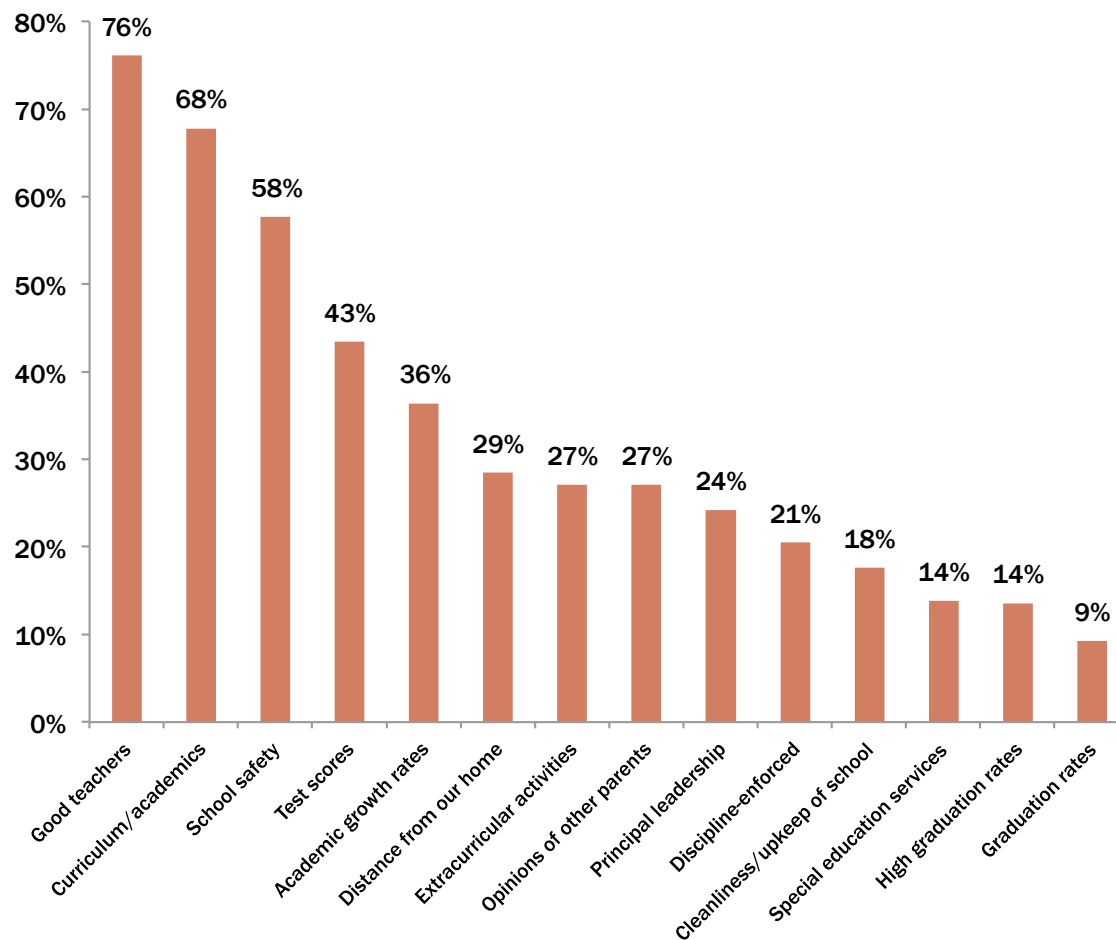
—DC Parent¹

Parents tell us that data does not tell the whole story when evaluating a school for their child.

¹GreatSchools Parent Roundtable Discussions, Feb – April 2013. N = 12 parents of K-12 students in DC and New Orleans.

FINDING #4: The top criteria cited by GreatSchools users for evaluating schools are good teachers, curriculum/academics, and school safety.

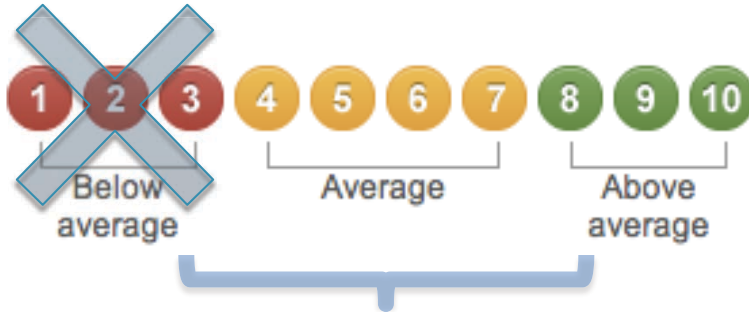
Parents using GreatSchools resources report that they look at a variety of criteria when evaluating school quality.¹ Good teachers, strong curriculum and academics, and school safety are the most commonly cited criteria by parents to evaluate schools.



¹GreatSchools U.S. Annual Customer Satisfaction Survey of users on school profile pages. Jan-Feb 2013. N = 376. Margin of error = ± 5.1 percentage points.
Q. What are the top five criteria you consider(ed) when evaluating a school for your child?

How do parents use and interpret school ratings?

FINDING #5: Parents use ratings to screen out low-performing schools, but will consider schools with a range of “medium” and “high” ratings.



- Stanford University researchers conducted a nationally representative survey of U.S. adults¹ to explore how the American public consumes information about schools when assessing school quality.
- Respondents were asked to rank schools rated differently in “achievement,” “gains” (value-added), and “school climate.” They first eliminated schools with “low” ratings in any category, while expressing preferences for schools with a range of “medium” and “high” ratings.

¹YouGov Survey “How Americans Assess School Quality.” June-July 2013. Center for Education Policy Analysis, Stanford University, and GreatSchools. N = 1,000 U.S. adults. Margin of error = ± 3.1 percentage points.

FINDING #6: When evaluating schools based on ratings, Americans prioritize, in order: achievement, gains, and school climate.

- When respondents ranked schools with specific ratings for “achievement,” “gains,” and “school climate,” they expressed preferences, in order, for **achievement** and then gains and then school climate.¹
- In other words, achievement was #1, gains was #2, and school climate was #3.

achievement

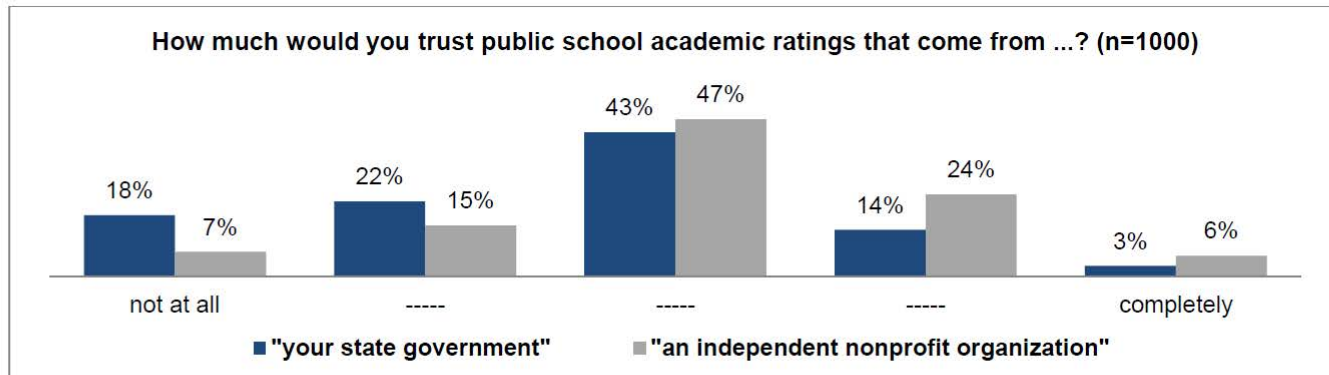
gains

**school
climate**

¹YouGov Survey “How Americans Assess School Quality.” June-July 2013. Center for Education Policy Analysis, Stanford University, and GreatSchools. N = 1,000 U.S. adults. Margin of error = ± 3.1 percentage points.

FINDING #7: Americans report trusting school ratings from independent nonprofit organizations more than ratings from their state government.

- Respondents were asked how much they would trust public school academic ratings that come from an independent nonprofit organization or their state government. Parents were randomly assigned to either the nonprofit organization group or the state government group.
- The study¹ found large, statistically significant differences, with respondents reporting considerably more trust in ratings from an independent nonprofit organization.
- This “trust gap” appeared in every tested subgroup related to gender, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, and parents vs. non-parents.



¹YouGov Survey "How Americans Assess School Quality." June-July 2013. Center for Education Policy Analysis, Stanford University, and GreatSchools. N = 1,000 U.S. adults. Margin of error = ± 3.1 percentage points.

FINDING #8: The scale and format of a school rating can influence how parents perceive a school's quality.

- GreatSchools conducted a survey¹ of parents to explore how the presentation of a school rating affects perceptions of school quality.
- Out of four possible options, parents responded most favorably to ratings scales of “1-10” and “A-F.”
- However, parents perceived a school rated an “8 out of 10” to be higher quality than a school rated a “B.”
- Parents were 87% more likely to think that a school rated an “8 out of 10” was “high quality” than a school rated a “B.” Similarly, parents were 30% more likely to think a school rated a “4 out of 5” was “high quality” than a school rated a “B.”

Lincoln High School

Public | 9-12
2,113 students
Phone: (555) 780-1311
Fax: (555) 760-2041
[School website](#)

7802 Jones Street
Milwaukee, WI 56789, Milwaukee County
Milwaukee School District
[Nearby homes for sale](#)

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¹“GreatSchools Online Survey, 2012. N = 975 GS.org users and 509 U.S. parents from online panel (combined sample of 1,484). Margin of error = \pm 2.5 percentage points.
Q. “What is your impression of this school's quality based on the rating provided?”

**What is the role of “word of mouth”
in parents’ school choice process?**

FINDING #9: The opinions of other parents can have a strong influence on parents' assessments of schools.



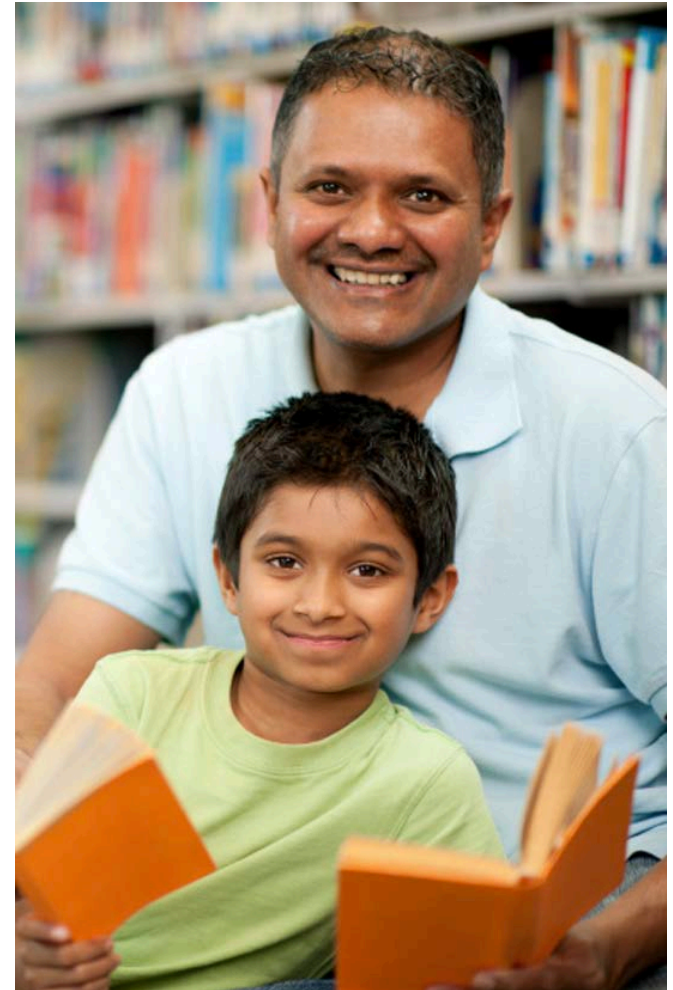
- Stanford University researchers conducted a nationally representative survey of U.S. adults to explore how the American public consumes information about schools when assessing school quality.¹
- Respondents were asked to assess schools in their own community. They were shown the names of schools in their home zip code, along with the schools' academic performance rating and two comments about the school from other parents.
- Those who read positive parent reviews about the school rated it 2/3 of a full letter grade higher than those who had read negative parent reviews.
- The effects of parent reviews were very large regardless of whether respondents saw reviews about instruction/learning or reviews about school culture.

¹YouGov Survey "How Americans Assess School Quality." June-July 2013. Center for Education Policy Analysis, Stanford University, and GreatSchools. N = 1,000 U.S. adults. Margin of error = ± 3.1 percentage points. *Note: Schools randomly received positive or negative reviews.*

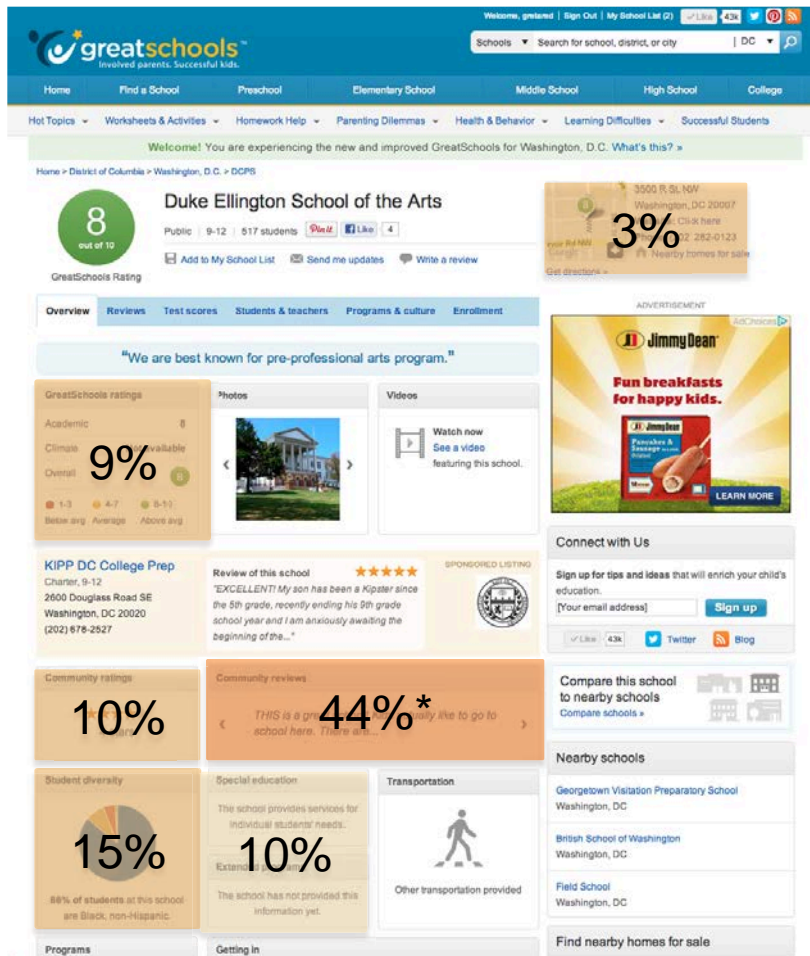
Parent reviews can influence a person's opinion of a school, even when he or she is already familiar with that school

- Parent reviews were found to be influential with every subset of respondents, even among parents who report being “very familiar” with the schools.¹
- Among parents who were “very familiar” with the school, the difference between seeing positive reviews and negative reviews was enough to shift their assessments of the school by approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ of a full letter grade.

¹YouGov Survey “How Americans Assess School Quality.” June-July 2013. Center for Education Policy Analysis, Stanford University, and GreatSchools. N = 1,000 U.S. adults. Margin of error = \pm 3.1 percentage points. *Note: Schools randomly received positive or negative reviews.*



Community review pages are the most visited pages within school profiles on GreatSchools.org



- Website traffic patterns on GreatSchools.org support the finding that parents value the opinions of other parents.
- GreatSchools onsite usage¹ demonstrates that after a user lands on a school overview page, the top content tile users click on is school reviews.
- In 2013, more than 8 million users accessed GreatSchools' parent reviews¹.

¹GreatSchools website analytics, Omniture July-Nov 2013

*% of total tile clicks of all users who clicked on any tile from July 2013-November 2013.

Data not shown for tiles that get 1% of clicks or less.

Summary of Findings

Summary of Findings

- 1) When parents were provided information about their school options, they chose higher-performing schools for their children.
- 2) Parents go online to research schools when actively choosing a school, but also to more generally gather information about a school or track its progress.
- 3) Parents seek information and guidance from multiple sources to inform their school choice process.
- 4) The top criteria cited by GreatSchools users for evaluating schools are good teachers, curriculum/academics, and school safety.
- 5) Parents use ratings to screen out low-performing schools, but will consider schools with a range of “medium” and “high” ratings.
- 6) When evaluating schools based on ratings, Americans prioritize, in order: achievement, gains, and school climate.
- 7) Americans report trusting school ratings from independent nonprofit organizations more than ratings from their state government.
- 8) The scale and format of a school rating can influence how parents perceive a school’s quality.
- 9) The opinions of other parents can have a strong influence on parents’ assessments of schools.

Implications and Further Research

Implications and Further Research

- Evidence supports that when parents are informed about their school options, it influences their school decisions.
- Parents need a breadth of school information from multiple sources to find high-quality and good-fit schools for their children. Parents trust information from independent sources and other parents.
- We want to conduct further research to better understand how to reach and engage parents and provide information that addresses the critical questions they have. Some questions to consider:
 - How do needs of parents vary across communities? We are partnering with local and state organizations to better understand local needs and provide the most relevant information to parents about their school options.
 - Across elementary, middle, and high school-choosing families, do parents' needs vary regarding the type of information they need to make an informed choice?
 - How much influence do students have on their school choice when making the transition into high school?
 - Are there trends in how different groups of parents access school information across GreatSchools.org? Can we leverage website usage data to facilitate better matches between users and the information they are looking for?
 - Does a student at a lower-performing school that is a better fit perform the same or better than a student at a higher-performing school that is a weaker fit?
 - Parents value a school's achievement over student gains. How can GreatSchools help parents understand the role of student gains in evaluating a school's quality?
 - Parents report that good teachers are a top criteria when evaluating schools. How do parents assess teacher quality? Opinions of other parents, school visits...?