HOW LATINO PARENTS ENGAGE WITH SCHOOL CHOICE

School choice in the form of charter schools, or public school academies as they are commonly called in Michigan, is rapidly expanding. Simultaneously, so is the population of Latino students. However, Latino parents experience many linguistic, cultural, and economic barriers to accessing this quickly growing segment of the educational marketplace. Research by Michigan State University Assistant Professor Madeline Mavrogordato and Johns Hopkins University Assistant Professor Marc Stein examines the engagement of Latino and non-Latino parents in the school choice process.

MOTIVATIONS BEHIND LATINO AND NON-LATINO PARENT CHOICE DECISIONS

This research examines what motivates Latino and non-Latino parents to consider a charter school and what informs their decision to enroll their children. The study was conducted in a major Midwestern metropolitan area in two phases. First, the researchers administered surveys to parents across the city with children enrolled in charter schools. The surveys asked why parents chose to enroll their children in a charter school and what sources of information they used to inform their choice. Second, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with administrators, teachers, staff and parents in one charter school to follow up on the survey. Zooming in on the experiences of Latino and non-Latino parents in one charter school was done to better understand the process that parents use to assemble different information sources to ultimately make a decision.

Data from the surveys and interviews both indicated striking similarities about the factors that motivate Latino and non-Latino parents to choose a charter school and the information that they use during the selection process. All parents interviewed were disillusioned by the traditional public school system and were similarly drawn to factors they perceived as indicative of academic quality. Small class sizes, positive physical and social environments, and symbols reminiscent of private school such as school uniforms were factors that parents associated with academic quality.

The study also found two important areas of divergence between Latino and non-Latino parents. One is reliance on social networks. While both Latino and non-Latino parents used social networks to inform their choice process, Latino parents relied more heavily on the word of mouth of friends, families and coworkers. Non-Latino parents used a broader set of tools like Internet searching and information from the mayor’s office. The second area of divergence concerned language barriers. Spanish-speaking faculty and staff served as information agents for Latino parents by helping them gather the necessary information during school visits to help make a decision about enrolling their child in a charter school. These staff members were hired for this purpose as an investment to attract Latino parents to the school.

WHAT IT MEANS TO YOU

The findings of this study can help district and school leaders understand what potentially motivates parents during the school choice process. School leaders could try to tap into social networks during marketing and recruitment efforts, given that social networks were found to be the primary way that parents gather information about schools, especially Latino parents. Additionally, district and school leaders might consider hiring Spanish-
speakers in the main office, in classrooms, and in an administrator office to serve as a link connecting the school to the Latino community. Finally, the findings of this study encourage district and school leaders to attend to the basics of school safety, academics and discipline because these factors stand out to Latino and non-Latino parents alike as prime motivations for choice. Regardless of their governance structure, schools may find these implications valuable in their quest of improving the accessibility of Latino parents and families and ultimately advancing quality education for all students.

READ THE ARTICLE


Summary by Alisha M. B. Brown, doctoral student in educational policy.

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