

**Reputations and Realities:  
A Comparative Study of Parental Perceptions, School Quality  
and the SmartChoices Website**

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## *Introduction*

Families in metropolitan Hartford face an increasing number of public school options, expanding from the Sheff v. O'Neill regional school desegregation remedy of 1996 and the Hartford Public School's all-choice initiative introduced in 2007. Under the all-choice initiative families can choose any public school within four zones designated by the city, and school administrators and teachers have more autonomy over their budgets and curriculum, which allows for the specialization of schools and competition between them to attract urban and suburban families to enroll.

The SmartChoices website (<http://SmartChoicesHartford.org>), a digital guide of the public schooling options available within the greater Hartford region, was created in 2008 in order to provide city and suburban families with user-friendly, comprehensive information about schools and to improve access to educational opportunities for all families in the Hartford region. During the fall of 2009 a team of Trinity College professors, student researchers, and community partners, led by Professor Jack Dougherty, conducted a series of parent workshops to provide urban and suburban families with access to the SmartChoices website and assist them in navigating through their school choice options. During the workshops, the team conducted interviews with parents in order to explore factors contributing to their definitions of school quality, parental motivations in choosing particular schools, and the funds of knowledge upon which their schooling decisions are based; as well as how parents use and respond to the SmartChoices website.

The current study investigates two questions: First, what types of parents participated in SmartChoices workshops and how did they vary in location, definition of school quality and

funds of knowledge? Second, how do these parents incorporate SmartChoices data into their definitions of school quality and does the website influence their decisions? Overall this study identifies three groups of parents in the study sample; active researchers, social followers and first time information seekers. Of these three groups both suburban and South End parents were represented as active researchers, while only South End parents were represented in the social followers and first time seekers groups. Parent responses to interview questions revealed that the funds of knowledge they base their definitions of school quality on vary widely across the three groups, as do the factors contributing to their definitions of school quality. The SmartChoices website influenced the public school choice preferences and actions of parents in different ways: approximately one third of parents changed their top choice, one third clarified their top choice and one third did not change.

### ***Background on Metro Hartford and SmartChoices***

In 1989 Elizabeth Horton Sheff and other parents filed a lawsuit on behalf of their children, charging the Connecticut system of separate city and suburban school districts as contributing to “racially segregated schools and violating constitutional rights to equal opportunity” (Dougherty, Wanzer and Ramsay 2007). In 1996 the Connecticut Supreme Court ruled that the “racial and socioeconomic isolation of Hartford schoolchildren did violate the constitution” (Dougherty et al 2007). In 2003 a voluntary desegregation remedy was proposed which stated that by June 2007 “at least 30% of public school minority students residing in Hartford would have an educational experience with reduced isolation through interdistrict magnet schools, attracting students from both urban and suburban communities, or project

choice, a voluntary program under which a Hartford student may transfer to a suburban school district (Dougherty et al 2007).

Adding to families' choice options, the Hartford school district introduced its all-choice initiative in 2007. The all choice initiative has been implemented in order to increase educational opportunities for metro Hartford families, and reduce the racial, ethnic and economic isolation within schools. School aged children are no longer predetermined to attend a particular neighborhood school; under the choice programs, families must apply for their elementary and secondary school options and may apply for any year in between. Parents may choose to apply to multiple Hartford Public School and Regional School Choice options.

SmartChoices is an interactive bilingual website created by the Cities, Suburbs and Schools project at Trinity College and community partner CONNCAN to assist parents in navigating through over 200 public school and program options in the city of Hartford and neighboring towns. Upon accessing the website, parent users type in the home address of their school aged child and his or her grade for the coming year into the search box and SmartChoices displays all of the public school options for which the child is eligible. The user can then sort the school information presented by school name, distance from home, racial balance and test achievement data. The website also provides links to the individual schools, application forms and transportation information. SmartChoices has been designed to empower parents with comprehensive schooling information in order to make informed decisions about their children's schooling options.

### ***Literature on Parents, Culture and School Choice***

Based on the available literature it is evident that there is a close link between social class, geographic location, and the types of information networks available to parents, and the tendency to choose. In 2008 the Hartford Public education system was transformed by an All-Choice initiative under Superintendent Steven Adamowski. Choice has been promoted as a solution to “social inequalities in urban schooling” (Reay 2004). In order for families to make informed decisions about their children’s schooling it is imperative that clear information regarding educational choices and opportunities be accessible to all families. Reay (2007) describes a public choice system as class differentiated, stating “parental choice is an inequitable process in which privileged parents are far more likely to have and exercise choice than their less privileged counterparts”.

In 1992 Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez defined funds of knowledge as the intellectual, cultural and linguistic resources on which communities rely. The funds of knowledge emphasized by these researchers pertain to the resources, modes of information transfer and knowledge essential to a community’s functioning and well being. Their study explored the home-school connections between Mexican primary school students and their local public schools, focusing on how families developed social networks and how these social relationships facilitate the development and exchange of resources. By understanding and accessing a specific community’s funds of knowledge, researchers were able to bridge community-school relations. Similarly our study focuses on Latino parents concentrated in the South End of Hartford, but goes further to include suburban parents. Our study is a comparison seeking to identify specific funds of knowledge of both sample groups, and draws upon already established social networks and modes of information transfer, in order to disseminate relevant, useful information about school choice. In understanding the funds of knowledge reported by parents researchers have

brainstormed how best to spread news about SmartChoices and parent workshops, and have considered such options as creating a music video by a Hartford based musician to be posted on youtube.

The majority of past studies on the choice preferences of parents have classified parents on the basis of social class. In 2007 Kathleen Noreisch studied the ways in which middle and working class parents formulate their school choices. In her article she separates parents into two groups, the 'active choosers', whom she associates with middle class choosers, with high educational aspirations for their children and who are well informed about the educational system, and the 'conventional choosers' whom she associates with working class choosers, who opt for the nearest or most convenient school. In an article published in 1995 about educational markets and choice, Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe similarly consider class status in making their distinctions between parents. They separate parents into three categories: privileged/skilled, middle-class parents, who are strongly inclined to choose; semi-skilled, predominantly working-class parents who have a predisposition to choose but may or may not have the information and resources to do so; and disconnected, working-class parents with few educational opinions and place no worth on choice. Both Noreisch and Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe present their respective groups with subjective judgments about the value they place on school choice and cite a working-class lack of awareness of the 'workings of the system' and limited access to sources of information regarding their child's education. Our study takes into account these previous findings, and seeks to define groups of parents who participated in school choice workshops with emphasis, on how and where they gain information and their geographic location without specific regard to their social class status.

Noreisch (2007) introduces parent concerns that may also influence the propensity to choose one schooling option over another, including the separation of siblings and friends, questions of ethnicity and social class, “Will there be people like me?” and maintaining meaningful community contacts if a student attends a school outside of the neighborhood or district. I was particularly interested in the role these factors would play in the school choices of our parent sample, especially with increasing interdistrict options that may remove a child from schools in his or her home community.

Ball and Vincent (1998) explore the importance of the types of knowledge parents retain and pass on in the school choice process, differentiating between ‘grapevine’ knowledge or ‘hot’ knowledge gained through social networks and ‘cold’ or formal knowledge distributed by schools. The article asserts that there are many different grapevines and that an individual’s access to them is structured by locality and “class-related factors” (Ball & Vincent 1998). The article supports the ideas presented in the Schneider and Buckley article that middle-class parents will attempt to fill out or contextualize the grapevine, maximizing their market information connecting ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ knowledge. Ball and Vincent contend that privileged/skilled choosers are most concerned with matching their child with the right school, while semi-skilled choosers are most concerned with enrolling their child in schools “generally perceived as good” (Ball & Vincent 1998). The results of our study seek to categorize parents based on the types of information they rely on and recognize that parents of the same geographic region may differ in their access to schooling information, choice preferences and actions.

Schneider and Buckley (2002) studied parental preferences in school choices using an internet website similar to SmartChoices, (DCSchools.com), which provided information about Washington D.C. area schools to students and families. They studied user search patterns to

determine what parents were most looking for in schools and to conclude that stratification can increase under a choice system if “parents with higher levels of education are more likely to exercise choice than less educated parents and are more likely to engage in search activity to gather information about their options” (Schneider and Buckley 2002). They recognize the unequal distribution of information and encourage the purposeful flow of information to ‘lower status’ parents. School choice is a multifaceted process influenced by factors evident across available literature including school reputation, geographic location, distance, parents’ value systems and social networks, and media sources among others. Our study differs in that it incorporates qualitative research interviews along with computer tracked quantitative data and recognizes the importance of parent responses, questions and concerns.

### ***Research Design for the SmartChoices Parent Workshop***

This study is grounded in the analysis of 73 interviews conducted during SmartChoices parent workshops held in the fall of 2009. One of the major objectives for the SmartChoices team was to design and conduct hands on training workshops for parents and families to better understand their children’s public schooling options. This objective combined two distinct and equally important elements: community outreach and student research. The SmartChoices team introduced the website to the community through one-on-one training sessions at local schools and school choice fairs, rather than waiting for (and hoping that) Hartford parents would find the website on their own. These training sessions also included interviews with parent participants to better understand their decision making processes and response to the website (Dougherty, Zannoni, Chowan, Coyne, Dawson, Guruge and Nukic 2010).

The interview participants included South End and suburban parents with school-aged children entering grades pre-kindergarten through eight. Interview guides were designed in both English and Spanish with careful consideration of wording and placement of questions [complete Spanish and English interview guides in appendices A and B]. Trinity professors, student researchers and community partners agreed on the final format and translation of the interview guide. A team of fifteen student researchers was trained to become familiar with the SmartChoices website, interview guide and the format of the workshop and to trouble shoot questions that might come up during actual parent interviews. The locations of the workshops targeted “mandatory choosers” parents of students entering grades five to seven who were required to select a different school for the coming year, but also included those parents choosing for a child entering pre-kindergarten through high school. Additionally the locations of the workshops were selected as South End neighborhood schools and regional school choice fairs to provide a diverse research demographic including parents from throughout Hartford and its suburbs. This study relies on the results of interviews conducted at six neighborhood events and one regional choice fair. The IRB granted approval of the workshop format and the interview guide.

During the workshops, the team of researchers conducted interviews with parents in order to explore factors contributing to their definitions of school quality, motivations in choosing particular schools, and the funds of knowledge upon which their schooling decisions are based; as well as how parents use and respond to the SmartChoices website. Parent participants were met by a greeter who issued them a voice recorder and explained that researchers care about what they think about school choice and the workshop. The guide gave a brief introduction about school choice and the workshop in the parent's preferred language, either English or Spanish, and

explained informed consent and the anonymity of their responses. These ideas of informed consent and anonymity were central to the plan submitted to the IRB for approval. Parents were asked for their pre-, mid- and post- workshop preferences for their child's enrollment for the coming academic year; and in pre- and post-workshop interview, what they look for when deciding what's a good school for their child, to provide a point of research comparison. Pre-workshop questioning occurred before parent participants sat down at the computer, guaranteeing that parent responses to pre-workshop questions were uninfluenced by data presented during the workshop.

Each participant was asked to input their child's home address and grade for the coming academic year, and SmartChoices produced a list of district and interdistrict schools their child is eligible to attend. The workshop guide then explained the categories of information presented by the website including: school address, distance from home, grades, application information, racial balance, test goal and test gain.

A DIGITAL GUIDE TO  
Public School Choice  
IN THE GREATER HARTFORD REGION

Smart

Choices

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[HOME](#)
[ABOUT THIS WEBSITE](#)
[CONTACT US](#)

• SEARCH FOR SCHOOLS •

Student's home address: \*  
eg. 100 Main Street, Hartford, CT

Student's grade next Fall: 3rd Grade

Show me public schools:

District schools

Interdistrict schools

SEARCH

30 schools found.

School & Management <small>(click for website)</small>	Address <small>(next school year)</small> <small>(click to zoom)</small>	Distance	Grades	More Info	Racial Balance	Test Scores						
<a href="#">America's Choice at SAND</a> (Hartford Public Schools)	<a href="#">1750 Main St</a> Hartford, CT	2.3 miles	PreK to 7	<a href="#">Apply to HPS Choice</a>	<div style="font-size: 0.7em;"> <input type="checkbox"/> White  <input type="checkbox"/> Asian &amp; Nat Am  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Hispanic Oct 2007  <input type="checkbox"/> Black                 </div>	<div style="font-size: 0.7em;">                     Percent At or Above Goal                      Dashed line is CT average                 </div> <table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center;">2007</td> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center;">17</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center;">2008</td> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center;">15</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2" style="text-align: center;">Avg</td> </tr> </table>	2007	17	2008	15	Avg	
2007	17											
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At this point parent participants were asked for their mid workshop preferences based on the information presented to them by the website. After recording mid workshop preferences, the guide explained the website's sort feature which allows a parent to organize and compare the information in a way that makes the most sense to him or her, according to the categories of information they value. At this point in the workshop parents were encouraged to explore the website while guides stayed nearby to answer any questions that might arise. On the workshop setting the computer recorded how the parent sorted, as the guide also made note of the ways the parent interacted with the website. In post workshop interview parents were asked a series of questions pertaining to our qualitative research and a series of demographic questions.

This study focuses on the questions: *Did the website change your mind about which schools are your top choices for your child?* and, *When you're making decisions about schools where do you get your information?* Following the interviews, recordings were transcribed, translated, coded and thematically analyzed.

### ***Major Findings***

Workshop Parent participants by location

Location	Number of Parent Participants
South End, Hartford CT	62
Surrounding suburbs	11
Total	73

Although the SmartChoices parent workshops collected data from 77 parents, this study focuses on the responses of 73 South End and suburban parents and excludes four respondents from Hartford's North End, who on their own are too small a sub group to be considered. I am defining the label South End parents, as parents living in Hartford Public School Zones three and four. There are 62 South End parents represented in the study and 11 parents from surrounding suburbs including East Hartford, Wethersfield and Manchester among others.

*Definitions of School Quality:*

Open ended parent responses identified academic and social factors contributing to parents' definitions of school quality that varied widely between South End parents and suburban parents. Both groups share similar academic aspirations for their children; however the academic factors identified by South End parents were more general than those of the suburban parents who tended to focus on matching their child with the specific academic offerings of a school. Definitions of school quality held by South End parents include such factors as "good academics," "good teachers," "curriculum," high "test scores," and co curricular offerings such as "art and music". Suburban parents also expressed valuing these factors; but elaborated to include "school ranking," "academic program offerings," the "academic focus" of the school, "preparation for college," "student: teacher ratio," and the "academic reputation" of schools. One parent affirms, "I really want the challenge in a top rated school, diversity, [and] offerings" (Parent 2186). Only one South End parent defined a good school as one that prepares students for college, with the majority instead focusing on the short term goal of students enrolling in and graduating from high school. One South End mother stated, "I look for stats, statistics... as far as how many kids go onto high school, how many kids have graduated..." (Parent 1927). By

contrast multiple suburban parents specifically stated college preparation as a defining factor of a good school. One mother affirmed, “A good school is one where they make sure the kids go to college,” she later reiterated this point, “[I look for the] percentage of kids that go to college, that is it. It’s the most important” (Parent 2169).

At this pre-workshop stage of the interview, South End parents did not reference the specific academic interests of their children as contributing to their school choice decisions, while many suburban parents referenced particular disciplines their children were interested in. For example, a Newington mother of a current sixth grader referenced her daughter’s blossoming interest in engineering and the sciences (Parent 2186). Similarly, an East Hartford mother referenced her child’s interest in reading and creative writing and expressed her commitment to enrolling her son in a school where he could develop these interests (Parent 2212).

Social factors contributing to parents’ definitions of school quality provided the sharpest contrast between the responses of Hartford South End and suburban parent participants. Social factors were considered to be as important as academic factors by South End parents. The factor cited most frequently by parents was the distance between a student’s home and school. 47% South End parent respondents noted distance as a key factor in their school choice decision. This focus was cited in a variety of different ways by parents, including reference to proximity to home, community and transportation. One South End mother stated, “Distance, everything is very important but for me the most important things is distance and grades” (Parent 1925). Another parent confirms, “Location that’s the most important thing right now. It was on the news this morning about the bussing, there won’t be bussing available for kids coming from out of town. I don’t know if that’s gonna be something that I want to do. I’m a working mom, for us to be providing transportation back and forth it’s going to be hard” (Parent 2262).

Multiple respondents acknowledged that it was important for their child to attend a school either within his or her community or with others from the community. Nearly one half of respondents stated that the safety and security of their child's school was a principle factor in their school choice decision. The next category referenced by parents was student behavior and discipline. Nearly two-thirds of respondents included "school atmosphere," student "discipline," "bullying," "strict" teachers or student "uniforms" as important factors contributing to their definitions of school quality.

In pre-workshop interviews, suburban parents mentioned fewer social factors than did South End parents. Only two suburban parents included social factors along with academic factors as contributing to their definitions of school quality, and both answers pertained to home-school ties, including collaboration between parents and the school and family involvement with the school. One parent from East Hartford explicitly stated that for her academic factors trump social factors. She states, "...the curriculum is the number one priority before the social stuff. For me the curriculum is very important where their main focus is, is it reading? How they help the kids with reading, writing and the arts" (Parent 2212).

There is a subgroup of South End parents who convey an understanding of magnet schools as higher quality schools and their child's best educational option. 20% of South End parents who did not answer with specific school names when asked in pre-workshop interview what their top choices for schools for the coming year were, reported interest in enrolling their students in a magnet school. One parent explained,

"[A magnet school is] a great school, they learn more, they're more on top of, they're not low level, they higher level, [students are] gonna learn something. Right now I got my niece in a magnet school, in kindergarten like my son, she already writes cursive, my son doesn't write.

They don't teach him that and in magnet school that little girl she already writing in cursive and she writes perfect too. That's magnet school they got the people, they got the sources" (Parent 1939).

While only one suburban parent specifically stated that she was interested in a magnet school without identifying a particular school in pre-workshop interview, all suburban parents cited magnet schools as their preferred schooling options. One suburban father revealed this preference referring to magnet schools as private schools and stating, "That [magnet school achievement] alone tells me where I want to send my child to. I want to send him somewhere where it's competitive where you can see the scores... There's a big difference between public and private- HUGE" (Parent 2264).

Both South End and suburban parents of children requiring special needs services, 11 parents in our sample, did mention accommodations offered by a school as the principle factor contributing to their definition of school quality. One South End parent echoed this need,

"When I was looking for schools I always look for the same things for my son. The special needs services, the distance, the grades but most important there has to be the grades and the special services. They have to tell me they have the special needs services. I know they are supposed to have it in every school, but that is not real..." (Parent 1925).

A suburban parent similarly stated,

"I'm looking for the school structure, because he's a special ed. student, so I'm looking for what is the program for him getting the help he needs because he is a special ed. student. How they accommodate that as far as him growing as an individual..." (Parent 2207).

Analysis of interview transcripts reflects that members of both groups display similar interest in enrolling their children in schools where they could spend multiple academic years.

One suburban mother stated that she is most interested in enrolling her son in a stable environment; “He really wants to go to a school where he doesn’t have to change every time he goes into a different grade, he wants the stability” (Parent 2207). Similarly a South End mother reflected, “I want to get them all the way to eighth grade so I don’t have to keep changing all the time. Kinder all the way to eight” (Parent 1939).

Both groups were divided over the issue of siblings attending the same school. For some individuals in both groups this was a critical consideration, and the enrollment of one child was contingent on the enrollment of his or her sibling. For example a South End parent responded, “ I would like a school where I can have my both kids, cause I’m not gonna have my other son here and have my daughter somewhere else” (Parent 1939). The majority of parents who do recognize this as a consideration cite the transportation of multiple children as the principle issue. The same South End parent continued,

“... I would like a school where I can have both. Because it’s gonna be tough for me to bring them to different schools My daughter is in fourth grade, she’s going into fifth...What’s gonna happen see they try to take her to an older school and then they don’t want to take the little one.”

A father from Wethersfield reflected a similar preference; “ ...my daughter goes to Hartford Magnet Science Academy, so I prefer the [school] at the same learning corridor. So I would prefer to have him there so they can get the same transportation” (2180). For other families this was not a concern and student enrollment was not at all contingent upon the enrollment of a sibling.

Before participating in the workshop not one South End parent included race as a factor contributing to his or her definition of school quality. However 40% of South End parents either

initially sorted by racial balance or cited race as a key factor in their decision about what constitutes a good school for their child in post workshop interviews. Some parents cited race as deterring them from a specific school. While exploring the website, one Hispanic mother reflected, “I like this too... but this is black, lots of black? Sometimes they like to fight with the Hispanic people and I don’t like that” (1935). Another Hispanic South End parent explained why she would not send her child to a predominantly Black school named Jumoke Academy. “Jumoke is good, but it is almost all... who is that? Black [pointing to the racial balance pie chart on the screen]. That would not be a good environment. I don’t want to send her there (Parent 19xx). This directly contrasts the responses of suburban parents regarding racial balance. While South End parents referred to race directly and to specific racial groups, ie Black and Hispanic; suburban parents referred to “diversity”. Suburban parents included diversity as a factor of a good school when asked in pre workshop interviews, and spoke of diversity as a positive characteristic of a school, a pull factor for families, rather than a deterrent. In looking at the high performance, test goal and test gain of Jumoke Academy a Wethersfield father expressed interest and asked his guide to include that on his list of potential schools. One suburban father questioned the category stating,

“ I’m a little curious about racial balance. Do you know why they even put that in there? *Would it really matter the racial balance when you’re choosing a school to send your kid there?* ...I’d be really interested to see if you ever poll the parents after using this to see where they send their kids because of something like this. *Why would you segregate your kids based on the racial balance?* It’s interesting to me” (Parent 2264).

Parents’ responses to post workshop questions about school quality centered on categories presented by the website: distance, racial balance and student achievement and progress as they pertain to their child’s academic experience.

*Funds of Knowledge:*

Types of Parent Participants	Total Number of Parents	Parents Represented	
		Percent of Total South End	Percent of Total Suburban
Active Researchers	43	56 %	100 %
Social Followers	16	26 %	N/A
First Time Seekers	14	22 %	N/A
Total	73	100 %	100 %

The analysis of South End parents’ funds of knowledge finds that parent resources of information vary as widely as their definitions of school quality. Parent responses can be organized into three groups based on their geographic location and the funds of knowledge that contribute to their existing definitions of school quality. The first group, whom I refer to as “active researchers,” is comprised of parent respondents who have actively sought out information about schools and the school choice process in Hartford, including those who frequent school and district websites, obtain printed material about schools and seek advice from friends and family about their school choice options. This group is made up of a diverse group of parent respondents; new and seasoned residents with varying levels of education. Many of these parents noted that they were connected to or frequent visitors of their child’s school. For this group open-ended parent response identified the principle methods of the distribution of schooling information, behind word of mouth transfer, as accessing websites and obtaining print

material. Parents in this group rely on the official network of schooling information that is maintained by school and district personnel in addition to their own social networks. Parents note that their child's teacher, principal or family resource aid discussed schooling options with them, or made recommendation about which schools or programs may best fit their child.

One parent belonging to this group explained that she finds her information about schooling on the Internet or through publications by the board of education, and has attended two school choice information workshops at her child's current school. She spoke about her social network of information, " I ask if [other parents] know the school and how it is, what they heard about it. Different parents have different opinions. I am an involved parent, I am in school everyday- I got the ties" (Parent 1925). The response of this parent and those with similar ideas about schooling suggests that active researchers incorporate the information they obtain through social networks into their own definitions of school quality, in order to confirm their own ideas about schooling rather than basing their opinions solely on information obtained through social networks. These parents recognize the limits of the word of mouth transfer and consider information obtained through this transfer along with other objective information obtained.

"Sometimes you speak to somebody they tell you all these good things but on paper it's different. So looking at these things it confirmed what I thought by just speaking to the recruiter right now" (Parent 2212).

The second group, which I call "social followers," is made up of those respondents reliant upon the word of mouth transfer of information about schools and school reputations in order to make their own school choice decisions. Members of this group rely on an unofficial network of information distribution between community members, in order to form opinions and make decisions about school quality and their school choice options. Within this network,

individuals trust the opinions of those more experienced with community schools, such as those who themselves have graduated from a Hartford public high school, those with older children enrolled in a Hartford area school, or those who may have worked in a formal or informal capacity in the schools. One parent stated, “ I’ve heard about [magnet schools] because one of my mom’s friends, her close friend, she works there and says it’s a nice school and they do a lot of things and they keep the students on track of things” (Parent 1941). These parents follow the trends of their friends, families and communities, such as seeking out a magnet school or steering clear of a particular school because members of their community are doing so.

The third group, whom I refer to as “first time information seekers,” includes those respondents who have not accessed schooling information prior to the SmartChoices workshop. Members of this group cite three principle reasons for not obtaining schooling information. First, approximately one third of respondents in this group are relative newcomers who have lived in the United States for less than three years, and are relatively unfamiliar with the Hartford school system. Many of these parents expressed frustration with their child’s Hartford schooling experience and stated that they did not want to reenroll their child in their current school for the coming school year. Others answered that they did not know where to obtain schooling information. All of these respondents listed their child’s current school among their top three choices for the coming school year. Third, respondents experienced a language barrier that prohibited them from accessing information and or speaking to school personnel in the way they would in their home country. Consequently members who experienced this inability to obtain information and or communicate were largely dissatisfied with their child’s schooling experience, and made repeated comparison to their previous schooling experience in their home country.

### *The Digital Divide*

The digital divide plays a critical role in who obtains school information and who is left behind in the school choice process. In order for families to make informed decisions about public schools they need access to reliable information. The information provided by SmartChoices, such as student achievement, racial balance, distance from home, and program offerings, is critical information parents would not be able to consume through their social networks, conversations with school faculty: principals, teachers and family resource aids, or personal visits to schools (Dougherty et al 2010). For this reason parents become better consumers when their knowledge of the choice system and the educational options within the system are increased through information obtained via the internet. 100% of suburban respondents self identified as regular computer users while 62% of South End parents self identified as regular computer users. Moreover 79% of all active researchers self identified as regular computer users compared to 56% of social followers and 50% of first time seekers. Beginning in January 2010 the Hartford Public School Choice program accepted only online applications, requiring choosers in Hartford to access and become familiar with the internet; those without access to or familiarity with the internet were left behind in the process. Behind the word of mouth transfer of information, internet research and accessing websites is the most common mode of obtaining schooling information as identified by SmartChoices data analysis.

### *The Incorporation of SmartChoices data into choice preferences*

SmartChoices influence on parent choice preferences was evident in parents' post workshop school selection. Of the 73 parents included in the study 27 changed their top choice,

meaning a switch from school A to school B. 24 parents clarified their top choice, meaning their pre workshop response was uncertain (“I don’t know”) or a vague response (“a magnet school”), but identified a specific schools in their post-workshop response. 22 parents did not change their school preferences between pre and post workshop interview, but when specifically asked “Did the website change your mind about which schools are the top choices for your child?” 13 responded that the website had changed their opinion, so while their preferences did not change they may have been confirmed or influenced by SmartChoices data. Of the total 73 participants 64% responded that their decisions had been influenced by the website, 29% responded that they were uninfluenced and 7% was unknown.

#### *The Incorporation of SmartChoices data into definitions of school quality*

In post workshop interviews some parents used the language to the website to define school quality. The category most frequently included in parent definitions of school quality was test scores, one parent confirmed “It [the SmartChoices website] reinforced my idea about what schools I wanted my son to go to. It’s clear to me the ones I would like him to go to are very high in test goals and test gains which is important to me” (Parent 2264). Another parent reiterated the same point “... at first I thought Montessori would be a good fit, I like their hands on learning aspect, but if the test scores are not improving it seems to me they’re not really moving in the right direction” (Parent 2206).

Racial balance was the next most frequently cited factor contributing to South End and suburban parents’ definitions of school quality. A suburban parent stated, “I want to make sure there’s a racial balance, I don’t want them to go to an all white school, or versus an all African American or all Hispanic I want them to have a balance” (Parent 2167).

An Hispanic South End parent emphasized racial diversity as an important factor of a “good school” during the latter half of her interview. “As for [my son], like I said before, it would be the race, it needs to be a mix of race. It has to have like a 50/50 percentage” (Parent 1927). This parent clearly picked up on the “50/50” racial language spoken by the SmartChoices guide when first introducing the website. This parent had not mentioned race as a factor contributing to her definition of school quality or as influencing her school choice decisions in pre workshop interview. In a post workshop interview another parent reflected, “I’m interested in racial group because I want my daughter where the majority are of all groups where she can live and learn with all groups” (Parent 1929).

### *Significance*

This research is particularly significant because school choice affects every child in metropolitan Hartford. Helping parents to locate and understand the schooling information available to them empowers them with the ability to make the most informed choice for their children and grants them access to improved educational opportunities.

The choice movement is sweeping across America in cities including Hartford, Chicago, Austin and San Francisco among many others. Exploring the funds of knowledge on which parents rely provides insight into how best to reach parents with important school choice information. Understanding how parents make sense of this information allows researchers to cater the dissemination of critical information regarding educational opportunities to the specific needs of the communities they service.

SmartChoices researchers believe the website to be the first of its kind, providing bilingual address specific information to families about their schooling options. As such it is

crucial that research be conducted to understand how parents use and respond to the website, as well as the elements they find most useful and any changes they might be interested in seeing. SmartChoices is only valuable to people who have access and knowledge to use it wisely. Our research uncovered that future SmartChoices community outreach needs to cater to new computer users, “who may also need literacy support to understand and interpret key data categories, as well as hands on guidance on basic computer skills such as sorting data and following through with on-line application forms,” in order to serve the largest number of families (Dougherty et al 2010). Compiling transcripts of every interview conducted provides a vault of information on which future conclusions can be drawn. This project provided a tremendous opportunity for qualitative research and the building of school-family connections as well as connections between members of the Trinity community and Hartford families.

## APPENDIX A: SmartChoices Interview Guide

**SmartChoices Parent Workshop Interview Guide** English version, October 29, 2009

**Greeter:** Welcome to our school choice workshop. We will help you learn about different public school choices available for your child, and you will help us to learn about what parents are looking for. *[Ask language pref, assign Guide]* **1) Circle: English / Spanish / other** I'd like to introduce you to your Guide, who will take you to the workshop and also ask some questions to understand what you think about school choice. The questions are voluntary, your answers are anonymous, and you can stop at any time. Are you willing to participate and wear this recorder necklace, which records your words? We really care about what you think.

**2) Event Date & Guide:** \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ **3) Voice recorder & track code** \_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

**A) Pre-workshop questions in the Greeting Area:**

**Guide:** Public school choice means that parents can submit applications for schools that you would like your child to attend. Everyone is welcome to apply, but if your child is completing the last grade at his/her current school, you must apply. In the spring, lotteries will select some applicants to be enrolled in each school. Today I will show you how to find more information for ALL of the public schools for child is eligible to attend.

First, **please select one child** in your family who might apply for a school.

(3) What is this child's **current school?** \_\_\_\_\_ (4) **current grade?** \_\_\_\_\_

(5) So, that means that for next fall, your child would be **applying to enter grade** \_\_\_\_\_ ?

*If selects child who will be entering Grade 9 or above next fall, ask:* Do you have any children who might apply and who will be entering Kindergarten thru 8th grade next fall?

*If yes:* For this workshop, would you be willing to focus on this [K-8] child first?

(6) For this child, what are your **top choices** for schools next fall?

a) \_\_\_\_\_ *if needed, ask for at least 3*

b) \_\_\_\_\_

c) \_\_\_\_\_ *accept ANY school names*

d) \_\_\_\_\_ *(even if erroneous) but repeat*

e) \_\_\_\_\_ *to confirm what you heard*

\*(7) **What do you look for** when deciding what's a "good school" for your child?

*[Write any keywords]*

**B) Computer workshop questions:** **Link:** [smartchoices.trincoll.edu/workshop.html](http://smartchoices.trincoll.edu/workshop.html)

(8) **Guide:** write parent's **START time** on using website \_\_\_\_\_

Please sit in front of this computer and I'll walk you through this website, called SmartChoices, which gives you more information about public school choice options for your child. (9) **Have you used this website before**, or is this your first time? **[circle: before OR first]**

This first page explains how there are two main types of schools -- district and interdistrict -- in the city and suburban region. Before you begin, it asks if you voluntarily agree

to allow your search data to be collected anonymously to help researchers like us learn more about school choice. If you agree, please click the “start” button to begin.

Next, type your child’s home address, choose next year’s grade level, and click Search. On map, red button shows your home, blue shows district schools, and green interdistrict schools

*[SKIP over the “Sort by” feature for now. Column sorting is randomly assigned]*

Here’s information about all of the public schools that your child is eligible to apply for.

Under **School Name**, each blue underline means you can click to read more. Try it. .

When you click on a **School Address**, the map shows you its location. Try it. . .

The **Distance** column tells you how many miles the school is located from your address.

The **More Info** box shows you when and how you can apply for each school that interests you.

The **Racial Balance** circles show the percentages of different groups of students at each school: Black, White, Asian & Indian, and Hispanic.

The last two columns, Test Goal & Test Gain, tell you different information about school scores.

**Test Goal** shows the percentage of students who met the standard on their Connecticut tests, and whether it was above (or below) the state average, which is the dashed line. For example, for this school [*point to an easy example near the top of the results*], X % of students met the test goal, and that was above/below the state average.

**Test Gain** shows how many points scores went up (or down) for this school over the past year, by comparing what 3rd graders scored in 2008 to what 4th graders scored in 2009, and so forth. Green arrows show positive gains, meaning that on average, scores increased as students moved up grade levels. Red arrows show negative gains, meaning that on average, scores decreased. And sometimes you see a zero, meaning there was no change, or a “no data” message because there was not enough information available.

So for the school we just looked at [*go back to example above*], the percentage of students who met the Test Goal was X %, and their Test Gain moved Y points up (or down) over the past year.

There’s a lot of information on this page. Do you have any questions so far?

**C) Mid-workshop question: *\*\*IMPORTANT - write User ID = \_\_\_\_\_ (on screen)\*\****

(10) Before we continue, I’d like to pause to ask you one question again. Based on the information you have seen so far, for your child, what are your **top choices** for schools next fall?

- \_\_\_\_\_ *if needed, ask for at least 3*
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_ *accept ANY school names*
- \_\_\_\_\_ *(even if erroneous) but repeat*
- \_\_\_\_\_ *to confirm what you heard*

Now I’d like to show you one more feature, called the **Sort button**. Please **click on it to see the 5 ways you can organize** all of this school information, and I’ll explain each:

School name -- lists all schools in alphabetical order

Distance -- lists schools beginning with those that are closest to your address

Racial balance -- lists schools with those closest to a 50/50 white/minority mix at the top

Test Goal -- lists schools with the highest percentage at the top

Test Gain -- lists schools with the largest point increase from last year at the top

Please **go ahead and explore** to find out which way of sorting makes the most sense to you.

\* 11) Guide: **write observation notes** on how the participant interacted with the website. For example, which column(s) -- if any -- did the participant seem to focus on more than others?

(12) Guide: write parent's **STOP time** on using website \_\_\_\_\_

**D) Post-workshop questions:**

13) Based on everything you know, for your child, what are your **top choices** for schools next fall?

- a) \_\_\_\_\_ *if needed, ask for at least 3*  
 b) \_\_\_\_\_  
 c) \_\_\_\_\_ *accept ONLY school names*  
 d) \_\_\_\_\_ *in SmartChoices result*  
 e) \_\_\_\_\_ *repeat to confirm*

\*14) In general, what do you look for when deciding what's a "good school" for your child?  
*[Listen carefully and jot down any keywords for all open-ended questions below]*

\*15) When you used this website, what went through your mind? How did you feel?

\*16) What was the most helpful information for you on this website?

\*17) Did the website change your mind about which schools are the top choices for your child?  
*[Pause: Why/why not?]*

\*18) Is there any information you're still looking for in order to make your school choices?

19) When you're making your decisions about schools, where do you get your information?

*[Pause for open response. \*\*Then ask follow-ups, circle Y/N; if Y say: "Tell me more . . ."]*

- a) Have you ever attended a school choice fair or information session before this? Y/N  
 b) Have you ever asked friends or family for advice about choosing schools? Y/N  
 c) Have you ever looked at flyers, booklets, or other printed info about schools? Y/N  
 d) Have you ever looked at commercials on TV or the radio about schools? Y/N  
 e) Have you ever searched on a computer for information about schools? Y/N

20) How many school-age children live in your home? \_\_\_\_\_

21) *[If more than 1 child:]* Do the schools your other children might attend next year affect your choice decision for this child? Y/N

22) How many schools have you visited other than ones that your children currently attend? \_\_\_\_\_

23) How long have you lived in the Hartford area? \_\_\_\_\_ yrs

24) What was the last level of school you completed? *some HS /HS dipl /some Coll /Coll deg+*

25) Are you relatively new to computers, or do you regularly use one? *new / regular*

26) For the child you selected, how do you describe his/her race or ethnicity?

*[write response using parent's own words:]* \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you** for your cooperation. Would you please **hand back** the voice recorder necklace?

**Reminders for Guides:**

- a) Press the **STOP button** on the recorder  
 b) Give the **handout packet** to each parent to take home  
 c) **Close** the internet browser and **reopen** to the workshop link for a **new userID**  
     <http://smartchoices.trincoll.edu/workshop.html>  
 d) **Return** the recorder and completed interview guide to research coordinator

## APPENDIX B: Spanish Interview Guide/ Taller: Guia de Entrevista

**SmartChoices Taller Guia de Entrevista****DRAFT 10 de noviembre, 2009**

Bienvenidos a nuestro taller de las opciones de escuelas públicas. Le ayudaremos a aprender acerca de las diferentes opciones de escuelas públicas para su hijo en la ciudad de Hartford y los suburbios alrededor, y usted nos ayudará a aprender acerca de las ideas de los padres sobre las escuelas **1) English / Spanish / other**

Me gustaría presentarle a su guía que le llevará a usted al taller y le hará preguntas para entender lo que usted piensa acerca de las escuelas. Las preguntas son voluntarias, sus respuestas son anónimas y puede parar cuando quiere. ¿Está dispuesto a participar y llevar esta grabadora que graba sus palabras? Nos importa lo que ud. piense.

2) **Event Date & Guide:** \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ 3) **Voice recorder & track code** \_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_

**A) Pre-workshop questions in the Greeting Area:**

**Guide:** Las opciones de las escuelas públicas significa que padres pueden enviar aplicaciones para las escuelas a las que le gustaría que asistan sus hijos. Todos tienen la oportunidad de aplicar, pero si su hijo(a) estará en el último año de su escuela actual, es necesario que aplique. Esta primavera una lotería seleccionará a algunos estudiantes para inscribirlos en cada escuela. Hoy mostraré como buscar más información de todas las escuelas a las que su hijo puede asistir. Por favor seleccione a un hijo de su familia que puede aplicar para una escuela. (3) ¿Qué es la escuela actual de su hijo? \_\_\_\_\_ (4) nivel actual? \_\_\_\_\_

(5) Entonces, en el otoño que viene su hijo aplicará para entrar al grado \_\_\_\_\_

¿ Tiene un hijo que puede aplicar y que entrará a cualquier grado – desde kindergarten hasta octavo grado – en el otoño que viene? ¿Para este taller, podemos enfocar en este hijo primero?

(6) ¿Para este hijo, cuáles son sus preferencias de escuelas?

- a) \_\_\_\_\_ *if needed, ask for at least 3*
- b) \_\_\_\_\_
- c) \_\_\_\_\_ *accept ANY school names*
- d) \_\_\_\_\_ *(even if erroneous) but repeat*
- e) \_\_\_\_\_ *to confirm what you heard*

\*7) ¿Para usted, cuáles factores son importantes cuando decide una escuela buena para su hijo?

**B) Computer workshop questions:****Link:** [smartchoices.trincoll.edu/workshop.html](http://smartchoices.trincoll.edu/workshop.html)

(8) **Guide:** write parent's **START time** on using website \_\_\_\_\_

Por favor siéntese al frente de la computadora y le mostraré este sitio web, llamado SmartChoices, que da información sobre las opciones de escuelas públicas para su hijo.

(9) ¿Es la primera vez que se usa este sitio web o lo ha usado antes? **Circle: before or first**

Esta página explica los dos tipos de escuelas, las escuelas del distrito y las escuelas entre distritos en la ciudad de Hartford y los suburbios de alrededor. Antes de comenzar, le pregunta si nos da permiso para usar su información de búsqueda para ayudar a investigadores como nosotros a aprender más acerca de las opciones de escuelas. Si está de acuerdo, por favor haga clic en “Estoy de acuerdo” para comenzar. Ahora, escriba la dirección de su hijo, el grado escolar en el que estará el próximo año, y haga clic en buscar. En el mapa, el botón rojo muestra su dirección, los botones azules muestran las escuelas del distrito y los botones verdes muestran las escuelas entre distritos.

*[SKIP over the “Sort by” feature for now. Column sorting is randomly assigned]*

Aquí está la información acerca de las escuelas a las que su hijo puede asistir.

Debajo del nombre de la escuela, cada nombre subrayado en azul significa que al hacer clic encontrará más información acerca de la escuela. Tráelo...

Cuando hace clic en la dirección de la escuela, el mapa le muestra su locación. Tráelo...

La columna de distancia le muestra cuantas millas hay entre la dirección de su hogar y la escuela.

La caja de 'Más info' le muestra cuándo y cómo puede aplicar a cada escuela que le interese.

Los círculos de 'balance racial' le muestran los porcentajes de diferentes grupos de estudiantes para cada escuela: negros, blancos, asiáticos e indios, e hispanos.

Los columnas finales, Promedio aceptable y aumento al año, le muestran diferente información acerca de los puntajes de los exámenes estatales en las escuelas.

Promedio aceptable le muestra el porcentaje de estudiantes que alcanzaron la puntuación estándar en sus pruebas del estado, y si es que estaba por encima (o debajo) del promedio del estado, el cual es representado por la línea punteada. Por ejemplo, en esta escuela, X% de estudiantes alcanzaron la meta estándar del examen, la cual estuvo por encima/debajo del promedio del estado.

El aumento al año le muestra cuántos puntos se han subido (o bajado) en esta escuela durante el año pasado, al comparar la puntuación de los niños de 3er grado en el 2008 con la puntuación de los niños de 4to grado en el 2009, y así sucesivamente. Las flechas verdes reflejan ganancias positivas, lo que significa que en promedio la puntuación subió a medida que los niños pasaron de grado. Las flechas rojas muestran ganancias negativas, lo que significa que en promedio, la puntuación bajó. A veces verá un cero, lo que quiere decir que no hubo cambio, o un mensaje de 'no data' porque no hubo suficiente información disponible.

En la escuela que acabamos de ver, el porcentaje de estudiantes que alcanzaron la meta estándar de Test Goal fue X %, y su Test Gain subió (o bajó) por 'Y' puntos durante el año pasado.

Hay mucha información en esta página. ¿Tiene algunas preguntas ahora?

**C) Mid-workshop question: *\*\*IMPORTANT - write User ID = \_\_\_\_\_ (on screen)\****

(10) Antes de continuar, me gustaría hacerle una pregunta más. Basado en la información que ha visto hasta ahora, ¿Cuáles cree que son las mejores alternativas de escuelas para el próximo año para su hijo?

- a) \_\_\_\_\_ *if needed, ask for at least 3*
- b) \_\_\_\_\_
- c) \_\_\_\_\_ *accept ANY school names*
- d) \_\_\_\_\_ *(even if erroneous) but repeat*
- e) \_\_\_\_\_ *to confirm what you heard*

Ahora me gustaría mostrarle este botón (SORT) Por favor hágale un clic para ver las cinco maneras en las que puede organizar toda la información escolar, y explicaré cada una:

Nombre de la escuela lista las escuelas en orden alfabético

Distancia presenta las escuelas más cerca de su dirección

El balance racial muestra las porcentajes del grupos diferentes a cada escuela: negro, blanca, asían e indiano, y hispánico.

Promedio aceptable el logro actual de la escuela, los que logran mejor de arriba

Aumento al año lista las escuelas con el mejor cambio del año pasado de arriba

Por favor explora estas opciones para decidir cuales factores son los más importantes para usted.

\* 11) *Guide: write observation notes on how the participant interacted with the website. For example, which column(s) -- if any -- did the participant seem to focus on more than others?*

(12) *Guide: write parent's STOP time on using website \_\_\_\_\_*

**D) Post-workshop questions:**

(13) Basado en todo lo que sabe, ¿Cuáles son las mejores opciones de escuelas para el próximo otoño para su hijo?

- a) \_\_\_\_\_ *if needed, ask for at least 3*  
 b) \_\_\_\_\_  
 c) \_\_\_\_\_ *accept ONLY school names*  
 d) \_\_\_\_\_ *in SmartChoices result*  
 e) \_\_\_\_\_ *repeat to confirm*

\*14) En lo general, ¿Cuáles factores son importantes cuando decide que una escuela es ‘buena’ para su hijo?

\*15) A medida que usaba este sitio web, ¿qué pensaba? ¿Cómo se sentía?

\*16) ¿Cuál fue la información más útil de ésta página web para usted?

\*17) ¿Cambió la página web sus su opinión acerca de cuáles son las mejores escuelas para su hijo? ¿Por qué/Por qué no?

\*18) ¿Hay alguna información extra que necesite para hacer sus decisiones escolares?

19) Cuando hace decisiones sobre las escuelas, ¿dónde encuentra su información?

[Pause for open response. \*\*Then ask follow-ups, circle Y/N; if Y say: “Tell me more . . .”]

- a) ¿Ha asistido a un taller o una reunión de sus opciones escolares antes de esto? Y/N  
 b) ¿Le ha preguntado a amigos o familia acerca de cómo elegir escuelas? Y/N  
 c) ¿Ha visto avisos, panfletos, u otra información impresa acerca de escuelas? Y/N  
 d) ¿Ha visto comerciales en la TV o en la radio acerca de escuelas? Y/N  
 e) ¿Ha buscado alguna vez información en la computadora acerca de escuelas? Y/N

(20) ¿Cuántos niños de edad escolar viven en su casa? \_\_\_\_\_

(21) [If more than 1] ¿Las escuelas a las que sus otros hijos asisten afectan su decisión de escuelas para este hijo? Y/N

(22) ¿Cuántas escuelas ha visitado aparte de las escuelas a las que sus hijos van actualmente? \_\_\_\_

(23) ¿Hace cuántos años vive en el área de Hartford? \_\_\_\_ years

(24) ¿Cuál fue el último nivel escolar que completó usted? \_\_\_\_\_

(25) ¿Usa la computadora con frecuencia o no? *new / regular*

(26) Para el hijo selecto, describe su raza o etnia por favor \_\_\_\_\_

Muchas gracias por su cooperación, favor de devolver su grabadora.

**Reminders for Guides:**

- a) Press the **STOP button** on the recorder  
 b) Give the **handout packet** to each parent to take home  
 c) **Close** the internet browser and **reopen** to the workshop link for a **new userID**  
     <http://smartchoices.trincoll.edu/workshop.html>  
 d) **Return** the recorder and completed interview guide to research coordinator

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