

# CHOOSING INDIANAPOLIS CHARTER SCHOOLS: ESPOUSED VERSUS REVEALED ACADEMIC PREFERENCES

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Much of the debate surrounding school choice in general and charter schools in particular is around concerns regarding the types of students who will choose to leave their traditional public school (TPS) in favor of enrolling in a charter school (CPS) and the possible effects of these choices on the schools that they are leaving behind (Henig 1994; Schneider, Teske, and Marschall 2000;) (Dee & Fu, 2004) . Critics of charter schools claim that they will “skim off” the highest achieving students from the traditional public schools and will lead to the further segregation of schools along racial and ethnic lines (Orfield & Lee, 2007). Others are concerned that market-based policies, including charter schools, will exasperate inequities based on socioeconomic status and special needs, in addition to race and ethnicity (Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, & Henig, 2002).

Witte and Thorn (1996) have noted, one of the most important sets of research questions in regard to public school choice is “Who chooses and why?” This question set is important because as many have noted, there is a persistent fear, especially among opponents of public school choice that expanded public school choice may lead to an increase in school segregation along racial/ethnic and socioeconomic lines (e.g. Henig, 1994, 1998; Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000; Weiher & Tedin, 2002). Given this, it is important to understand why parents make the school choices they do.

Studying this question is complex. The most straight forward methodology is to simply ask parents and students why they choose to attend a charter school. Much research regarding reasons for school choice follows this approach by using surveys or interviews of parents or guardians (Schneider, et al, 2000). However, as will be discussed below, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which espoused reasons for choice actually mirror real choices that parents and students make; surveys and interviews can be biased.

Using a unique dataset of charter schools authorized by the mayor in Indianapolis, Indiana, this paper compares parents' stated reasons for choosing a charter school versus their revealed preferences as evidenced by their actual school switching behavior. Specifically, we address the following research questions:

1. What percentage of public school switchers say they switch to a charter school for academic versus other reasons in a parent survey?
2. How do these espoused preferences compare to revealed (actual) preferences based on school switching behavior?

In 2006 the Indianapolis Public Schools superintendent requested a moratorium on the opening of new charter schools because he claimed that they were “luring” away many students from the district and that the district would need to consider closing schools and discontinuing programs if enrollments in the district continued to decline (The Indianapolis Star 2006). In this regard, Indianapolis is similar to other locales with respect to debates and concerns about charter schools.

### Parental Preferences in School Choice

An educational reform strategy that has gained traction and popularity over the last decade is the idea of public school choice, meaning that parents and students should have more choices in the types of public schools they attend. Over the last 10 to 15 years charter schools have increasingly come to represent the ideas of public school choice. From 1991 when Minnesota enacted the first charter school law, the number of charter schools in the United States has increased to approximately 4,500 schools operating in 40 states and the District of Columbia serving approximately 1.5 million students in 2008 (Center for Education Reform 2008).

Charter schools, broadly speaking, are publicly funded schools that are granted some measure of independence from state and district regulations in exchange for accountability to increase student achievement (Kolderie 1990). It is in part due to this broad definition of charter schools that charter schools have wide appeal across divergent philosophical and ideological sectors of American society (Murphy and Shiffman 2002).

Embedded within the market metaphor of school choice, charter schooling operates on the notion that parents and students will be active consumers of education, and as such, they will make school choices that best fit academic and social needs. The underlying assumption of this market metaphor is that when given a wider choice of schools in which to enroll their children, parents will “shop around” (Schneider et al. 1998), weighing all available evidence and information on curricula, missions, services, and academic accomplishments and achievements, they will then make an informed decision as to which school best fits with their own educational beliefs and needs.

Charter school proponents argue that by allowing parents and students to choose their schools, they will enroll in schools that more closely match their educational needs and values and thereby increase the likelihood of positive educational outcomes such as increased achievement and graduation. This is both a supply and a demand side argument. From the supply side, proponents argue that in order to remain in business, charter schools must be responsive to the needs and wants of the market and their consumers. On the demand side, parents’ and students’ choices signal to charter schools and the market their preferences and desires for schools and education, whether in terms of curricula (e.g. “back to basics”, Afro-centric, etc.) or other tangible and intangible characteristics.

Both because of supply and demand, there should be effects of competition on outcomes for students. It is assumed that competition will spur traditional public schools to change and innovate, leading to improved student achievement. Furthermore, charter schools will have high levels of achievement both because of heightened accountability from parents and charting authorizers, and autonomy and professionalism for school staff.

Empirical evidence of parental school preferences in the context of school choice comes generally from two different sources. First, many studies have used surveys of parents to gauge the importance of various school characteristics (e.g., academic quality, racial composition, etc.) on parent choices. Most of this survey research indicates that all parents, regardless of race-ethnicity or socioeconomic status, tend to report that academic quality of schools is at the top of their list of important characteristics (Smrekar 2009; Schneider and Buckley 2002).

In a telephone survey of approximately 1,600 residents in four New York metropolitan school districts, Schneider and colleagues (Schneider et al. 1998) examined how parents differed by race-ethnicity and socioeconomic status (as proxied by educational level) in their evaluation of the importance of four separate dimensions of schools: (1) academic quality measured by high test scores; (2) racial composition; (3) values; and (4) discipline. They found that African American parents and those who had graduated from high school but had not attended college were more likely to indicate that academic quality was important compared with parents of other racial-ethnic groups or education levels.<sup>1</sup> Schneider et al. also found that racial similarity of a school student body to the parent's own race-ethnicity was rarely reported as important. In terms of racial diversity they found that white and college educated parents were more likely to indicate this factor as more important than minority and less educated parents.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that of the four dimensions reported in their analysis, academic quality was the most probable first or second response for all types of parents, regardless of race-ethnicity or education level.

Armor and Peiser (1998) studied household school preferences in the context of inter-district choice in Massachusetts. They also found that the majority of parents state that academic quality is a primary concern in choosing schools and further found little evidence for there to be much variation between white and African American households. In surveys of Texas charter school parents, Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, and Matland (2000) found little difference between race and class of parents and their stated preference for schools. Regardless of group (i.e., race by socioeconomic status) the researchers found that a majority of parents stated that academic quality and school and classroom size were important to them.

A careful review of the surveys and interview protocols used by researchers to study the role of academics in parent preferences in school choice reveals a number of complexities in interpreting the body of research pertaining to common errors of survey research including construct validity because of wording ambiguity, cognitive complexity, item priming effects, social desirability and mood state and temporal influences (see Sudman & Bradburn, 1982; Schwartz et al, 2008). In terms of construct validity, it is not clear what the research is measuring when referring to academics as a preference for school choice because researchers tend to ask different questions and the ways in which questions are worded vary from study to study, leaving open to interpretation what is meant by ‘academics’. Scheneider et al.(2000) included such statements as ‘quality of teachers and staff’ and ‘high math and reading scores’. Both could be interpreted as academic reasons. Keltiz et al (2000) asked ‘how important was educational quality to you when you chose your child’s charter school’? Weiher & Tedkin (2002) asked parents to identify the most important factor from a list, including ‘test scores’, while Teske et al (2007) used the term ‘academic quality’. Witte, et al. (2003) used educational quality in the chosen school, and Green et al (1998) asked about ‘improved academic quality’ and Lee et al

(1996) asked about school qualities in the choice process, including “the school requires students to take a lot of classes in basic subjects like math, English and science.” Rowley and Goldring (2008) asked parents to rate each criteria for choosing a school as being high, medium, or low priority in their thinking about school choice. Then composites were derived from factor analysis: “academic priority” consisted of (alpha reliability=.68), items such as overall reputation of the school, the school’s test scores, and quality of teachers.

A second source of confusion results from how the questions on the surveys or in interviews are asked. Some researchers ask, “which reason is the most important... (Schneider et al., 2000)” while others use items that are open-ended questions, rankings, or on a Likert scale. Thus some of these question types are relative to other reasons of choice (ranking), while some ask the parent respondent to rate each reason on a Likert scale. Some of the questions are quite complex, especially if asking over the telephone. One telephone survey read the following:

“Different parents believe that different things are important. We are interested in knowing which things you think are important. In this next section I will read you a list of some of the things that parents believe are important in a school and I’d like to know what you believe to be most important in your child’s education. From the following list of qualities about schools, first tell me which is the most important to you” (Schneider et al, 1998, p. 495. )

The list of 11 was then repeated 4 times, each time leaving off already named responses, changing the order of list to control for order effects. A similarly complex question is from the Lee et al (1996), also an interview:

“People consider a number of different things when they choose a school for their children. Even if you do not have school-age children, please tell me the three qualities on the list that you would consider to be the most important in choosing a child’s school. Which quality would you consider to be the least important?” (p. 83).

Ranking in general is a very difficult task, and doing this numerous times without having the items in front of a respondent can also increase the complexity of the tasks.

Such long introductions may also bias a respondent because of item priming, that is, “inclusion of an introduction that informs the respondent about what the items are attempting to measure before the respondent views the items, thereby increasing the face validity of the items” (Schwartz, et al, 2008, p. 2). While Schneider and colleagues did randomize the order of the choices to control for order effects, this factor may be an influence in other surveys or interviews used to inquire about parents’ decisions.

Furthermore, survey research must always consider the threat posed by social desirability: the propensity for respondents to respond in self-serving or socially desirable ways. Social desirability suggests that respondents will want to represent themselves in a favorable way through their survey responses (Crano & Brewer, 2002). What parent respondent will readily indicate that their first, most important reason for choosing a school is race or social status? Or what parents would not indicate that some type of academic consideration was a factor in choosing a school? Klietz et al (2000) acknowledge that parents would be aware that they should say educational quality is an important reason for choosing a school. As Weiher and Tedin (2002) clearly state the problem with many of these studies: “A common weakness of this research into the ethnic and racial implications of choice for choosers themselves is that the linkage between respondents’ stated preferences and actual racial and ethnic patterns in choice schools tend to be tenuous” (p. 81). One obvious reason for this is the social undesirability of expressing racial/ethnic reasons for choosing a school. Even if it were a response option on a survey, it is highly unlikely that parents would be willing to choose this response, even if racial-ethnic concerns were driving their decisions and choices in school

Finally, some of the parent responses may suffer from mood state or temporal influences. The mood at the time a person responds to a survey or interview, or their mood over a period of

time could influence their responses. If a parent had a negative encounter with their previous school over time, or during a particular time close to the data collection, or a positive encounter, it is hard to evaluate the extent to which these external factors or events could influence survey responses. In short, there may be common method bias in surveys and interviews used to evaluate the extent to which academic preferences are important in making school choice decisions (Campbell & Fisk, 1959).

In contrast to self report measures, using longitudinal student level data would allow researcher to track students from their school of enrollment prior to making a switch to a school of choice (Zimmer et al. 2009) to assess the extent to which parents' actual choices are indications of their switching from a school with lower academic achievements to a school with higher achievements. Owing in part to the difficulty in obtaining such data, to date only a handful of research studies have been able to examine parents' decisions by analyzing their actual choices of schools. For the most part these studies have looked at parental choices to investigate student sorting based on individual achievement and race-ethnicity. In a study of California and Texas charter school students Booker, Zimmer, and Buddin (2005) found that in both states it appears that charter schools are not "cream skimming" the best students as many opponents of charters fear, rather they appear to be targeting lower achieving or more at-risk students. In a similar investigation of segregation in North Carolina charter schools, Bifulco and Ladd (2006) noted that aggregate data may mask important variation when they compared changes in the peer environment for a sample of 6,480 students who transferred to a charter school from a traditional public school between 1996 and 2000. They found that African American 'switchers' moved to charter schools whose average achievement in mathematics and reading on North Carolina end of grade testing was markedly lower than the school from which

they came, while white students tended to enroll in charter schools that had higher average mathematics and reading achievement than the traditional public schools they left.

In the most recent study to date of this type, Zimmer et al. (2009) looked at switching patterns of traditional public school students who had switched to a charter school in seven sites<sup>2</sup> compared to non-switchers from the same districts and states. In all but one case (reading scores in Chicago) they found that charter school switchers had achievement scores that were on average below those of their non-switching peers. When disaggregated by race-ethnicity, comparisons showed that African-American switchers had lower scores in five of the seven sites and Hispanic switchers had lower average achievement in four of seven sites (compared to their same ethnicity non-switching peers). In contrast, white switchers in four of the seven sites had achievement scores that were higher than their white non-switching peers.

While the results of these studies do not speak directly to the role of perceptions of the academic quality of schools in driving school choices, they do raise questions as to whether parents choose for academic reasons or if they have sufficient information about the schools they are choosing and whether they actually know whether their choice schools have better academic performance than the schools they are leaving. It also raises the possibility that parents are choosing to switch based on reasons beyond academic considerations. Choice could contribute to creaming if families have limited information and knowledge about academic quality. That is, it may be that parents really believe they are choosing for academic reasons, but they have limited knowledge and understanding and tools to assess the academic quality of schools. These findings contrast with the self-report survey findings and demonstrate the need for closer examinations of parents' choices of schools. In this paper we extend this line of research by comparing actual choices with espoused choices on a parent survey.

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<sup>2</sup> Chicago, IL; Denver, CO; Milwaukee, WI; Philadelphia, PA; San Diego, CA; OH; TX

## **Methodology**

### Context of the Study

Indianapolis is unique in that it is the first and only city with mayoral control over charter school authorization and accountability. Beginning with three charter schools that opened in the fall of 2002, the Indianapolis' mayor's office has chartered 19 charter schools and closed one financially troubled one. This unique aspect of charter schooling provides an important backdrop for the study of charter schools and their effects on choice, competition and student achievement. Each of these charter schools underwent a rigorous and competitive application process and is held responsible to a comprehensive accountability system. These schools offer a wide range of educational programs – from high schools that focus on learning-by-doing to elementary schools with a back-to-basics approach. Some are run by national networks, such as Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), or associated with school reform groups, such as the Big Picture Company, while many of the schools are locally developed. For example, a number of the charter schools were developed by local philanthropists with particular emphases, such as serving students with limited English, or infusing technology in school. These mayoral charter schools are held accountable through the use of several different tools for evaluating school performance, including test score analysis, key findings from experts who visit the schools throughout the year, financial and governance reviews, and results from surveys administered yearly (Education. Innovation. Results. Indianapolis Mayor-Sponsored Charter Schools 2007-2008 Accountability Report , 2008).

The average age of the charter at the time of this study was approximately 3 years in operation with a range of age spanning from the youngest schools that were in their start-up year to the oldest which was approximately five years old. Indianapolis charter schools range in size from the smallest which enrolls approximately 100 students to the largest which enrolls 609 students with the average enrollment being approximately 250 students.

## Data & Methods

In the spring of 2007, the National Center on School Choice administered surveys to parents with children enrolled in mayoral charter schools in operation in Indianapolis. Parents were offered a \$15 gift card if they returned the survey and classes (homerooms) received a \$200 gift card if 80 percent of the classroom returned the survey. These procedures resulted in 84 percent of parents responding, for a total of 2,493 parents. Of the 2,493 responses, 1,587 (63.7 percent) came from another public school— either a traditional public school (N = 1,471) or another charter public school (N = 116). We call these parents charter school switchers. The remaining 906 parents came from private schools, homeschooling or the current charter school was the only school in which their child had ever been enrolled.

Because we are comparing parents espoused choices with their actual choices, we use student testing data to locate student records of those who switched from a traditional public school to a charter school. Due to lack of data availability for private and homeschooled students, these records are excluded from the analysis and we focus on public school switchers only. Further, data from one of the mayoral charter schools was removed due to the fact that it serves a special population of students who are recovering from drug and alcohol addictions (n =

15). Finally, we have removed three 12<sup>th</sup> grade parent observations due to low sample size. After these restrictions our sample includes 1,569 parent records of charter school switchers enrolled in an Indianapolis mayoral charter school during the 2006-2007 academic year.

### *Parent Demographics*

From demographic and personal information that we gathered from the parent surveys we were able to construct a measure of parents' socioeconomic status (SES). This measure is a composite standardized score constructed with parent education and family income, following the methods used by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) in its longitudinal studies such as the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002) and the earlier National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88). While mother's occupation, father's occupation, mother's education, father's education, and family income are used in constructing the SES composite used in and reported by NCES reports (Ingels et al., 2004), analyses and evaluations of the NCES composite construct variables has found that "a comparably valid and reliable SES composite could be constructed from the father's education, mother's education, and family income" (Freidlin & Salvacci, 1995, p.11) without the occupational information, which was considered difficult to code.

Our measure of socioeconomic status (SES) is a combination of parent education and family income reported by parents on the surveys. Parents were asked to choose the category that represented the highest level of education that they had completed (Did not graduate from high school, graduated from high school or GED, went to college but did not graduate, graduated from a 4-year college, earned an advanced degree after college). Family income was reported by parents on a range of income in 10,000 intervals from less than \$10,000 to more than \$50,000, with the dollar midpoints of each income range assigned to each parent. These two measures

were then standardized and then combined as an unweighted, linear composite to form our indicator of parental SES.

Across all parents in the sample, the mean reported income is approximately \$31,000 and the mean highest level of education is 2.8 which approximates to having gone to college but did not graduate. There is wide variation in mean parental SES across mayoral charter schools in Indianapolis. For example, school L (see Table 1) has the highest mean parental SES at 0.464. To put that value of average SES in perspective, this school has an average parental annual income of approximately \$42,000 a year and an average parental education level of 3.4 which is between some college and undergraduate degree. In comparison, school O has the lowest average parental SES (-0.759) which represents an average parental annual income of approximately \$25,000 and an average parental education level of 2.4 which is between high school graduate and some college. An ANOVA F-test of school mean parental SES was statistically significant, indicating that on average, schools are different in terms of student family income and parent education level. Table 1 also indicates that there is also considerable variation in parental SES not only across schools but within schools as well.

### *Race*

We ask parents on the survey, “What race or ethnic background do you identify with?” Responses were coded into four groups: White (388, 24.7 percent), Black (959, 61.1 percent), Latino (83, 5.3 percent), and other (139, 8.9 percent)<sup>3</sup>. These percentages are reflective of the

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<sup>3</sup> The “other” category includes Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Multi-racial and a blank fill in response other category. Due to low response rates for these individual categories, they were collapsed into a single “other” category.

racial-ethnic composition of the Indianapolis Public Schools from which the majority of these students come.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1 indicates that there is a wide range of variation in ethnicity among the charter schools. For example in School L approximately 94 percent of parents identify themselves as African American and less than one percent as white. At the other end of the continuum is School P, where 88 percent of parents identify themselves as white and only 8 percent identify themselves as African American.

## Variables

### *Parent Espoused Preferences*

In order to ascertain parents' emphasis on academics as a reason for choosing their charter school, we created a variable from the parent survey that we have termed *Academics as a Top Priority for School Choice* (ATP). Parents were asked to select the first and second most important reasons for choosing the specific charter school for their child(ren). Two of the reasons listed on the survey were academic related: academic quality and academic focus. The other reasons include size of school's enrollment, extra-curricular activities, services for special needs students, opportunities for parental involvement, safety at school, discipline at school, school location, and other. Answers selecting either academic quality or academic focus as the first most important were coded as 1 (N=992, 63.2 percent), the others as 0 (N=577, 36.8 percent).

To further triangulate parents espoused preferences we asked the parent's perception of the quality of their child's previous school. Parents may exercise school choice options to enroll

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<sup>4</sup> IPS's student composition in the 2006-2007 school year was 59 percent black, 29 percent white, 12 percent Hispanic, and other race-ethnicity students less than 1 percent. Data comes from the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data.

their children in a charter school if they feel that the academic quality of their currently enrolled school is not of a high enough level for what they want for their children. In a sense, a perception of poor academic quality may operate to “push” parents away from their currently enrolled school and to look for better perceived options through school choice. Each respondent was asked to rate the overall quality of the school that their child went to immediately prior to this school as excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor. Answers of excellent or very good were coded as Above Average (386, 24.32 percent), answers of good and fair were coded as Average (861, 54.88 percent), and answers of poor were coded as Below Average (313, 19.95 percent). 13 (0.82 percent) parents did not respond and were treated as missing.

Finally, a third variable that investigates potential academic reasons for choosing to switch to a charter school is the parents’ estimate of the average grade that their child received at their previous school, from A to F. The responses were coded into four grade average levels: 1=D or F (186, 11.9 percent), 2=C (467, 29.8 percent), 3=B (462, 29.5 percent), 4=A (273, 17.4 percent). Non responses and parents who responded that “No grades given” at their previous school were considered and coded as missing (181, 11.5 percent)

### *Parents Revealed Preferences*

To investigate the actual behavior of charter school switchers, we use data from the Northwest Evaluation Association’s (NWEA) growth research database (GRD) of student testing records that has been linked to school demographic data from the National Center for Education Statistics Core of Common Data. NWEA is a non-profit student achievement testing company that tests students in grades 2 through 10 in mathematics, reading and language arts. From the 2002-2003 to the 2005-2006 school year the Indianapolis Public Schools and other metropolitan

public school districts located within Marion County, Indiana contracted with NWEA to provide testing in both the fall and spring semesters. Also during this time period all of the mayoral charter schools contracted with NWEA for testing.

As noted above, of the 16 mayoral charter schools in operation during the study, one school was excluded because it serves a unique population of students that are recovering from drug and alcohol dependency. From the 2,807 students who were tested in one of the remaining 15 mayoral charter schools during the 2006-2007 school year we were able to locate 1,050 students in their school of enrollment prior to switching to a charter school. These students represent approximately 37 percent of the total students enrolled in the 15 mayoral charter schools in grades 2 through 11<sup>5</sup> in the 2006-2007 school year.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, we cannot link the surveys to the student records because the surveys were anonymous.

In order to examine academics at students' previous and current schools we merged school level Average Yearly Progress (AYP) determinations from the State of Indiana's Department of Education publicly reported school report cards from 2002 – 2007 to the student records based on the year and school of enrollment for each student.

Using this unique data set we are able to track students who were enrolled and tested in one of the Indianapolis mayoral charter public schools in the 2006-2007 school year and for whom a testing record was available in the school in which they were enrolled in immediately prior to switching to their current CPS. This allows us to compare students' previous schools to

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<sup>5</sup> Mayoral charters in Indianapolis also tested a majority of their 11<sup>th</sup> grade students in 2006-2007 (64 percent). Exclusion of these students did not change the results therefore they are included in this study.

<sup>6</sup> This number is low for a number of reasons. We can only track students if they were previously enrolled in a school that contracted with NWEA for testing. Further we cannot track students who have only ever been enrolled in their current charter school, homeschooled or enrolled in a private school. See Appendix A for more detail.

their current charter schools in terms of racial-ethnic demographics and academic achievement as measured by AYP status under the state of Indiana’s No Child Left Behind plan.

## **Results**

We first ask, to what extent are parents espousing academics as a top priority for their reasons for choosing a charter school? We then compare these results to parents’ actual switching behavior to see if espoused preferences are similar to actual preferences.

Parents’ espoused reasons for choosing a charter school

To what extent are parents espousing academics as a top priority for their choices of charters school to enroll their children? We first examine the distribution of parents’ responses to the variable Academics as a Top Priority (ATP) from the parent surveys. Overall, a majority of parents (63 percent) state that academics are a top priority in their choice of a charter school (). While the level of response is consistent for most grades we do see a slight decline from lower to higher grades in how parents rated academic focus and quality as a top priority. Grades were classified as being elementary (K-5), middle school (6-8) or high school (9-11). There are no significant differences between elementary and middle school parents in their ATP rating, but there are significant differences between high school parents and parents of the lower two levels.

While there is little variation in parental rankings of academics as a top priority across grades, with the noted exception between high school and lower levels, there appears to be much more variation in ATP by individual schools (Figure 2). For example in School N, which is known for its accelerated learning and college preparatory curriculum, fully 81 percent of parents rated ATP as the first reason for their choice of school compared to only 31 percent of parents in

school G, where the curriculum is centered on individualized attention in small classes and out-of-school internships. Both of these schools are high schools and indicates that even though overall high school parents had lower on average reporting of ATP, there is a significant amount of variation not only between all schools, but schools of the same instructional level. This may be an indication of the differences in mission, organizational structure, academic features, student population, and other school-level characteristics. In a case study of School N we learned that it is known for its rigorous expectations for all students and parents know upon enrollment that these students will be held to those expectations ( for example all students must take a college level class as part of a middle college program ).

To further investigate parents' espoused preferences we also looked at the association between the other two academic factors of interest and how parents regarded academics as a top priority. To detect if there is an association between ATP and parent-reported previous academic performance, and between ATP and grades received at the previous schools we created a contingency table from each of the two sets of factors. The contingency tables allow us to determine if the levels of ratings between the two factors in each table are independent of each other.

First we look at parents' ratings of the academic quality of their previous school compared to their preference for academics as a top priority for choosing their charter school. From the total column of Table 3 we see that 20.1 percent of parents rated their previous school as being below average, 55.3 percent rated it as average with the remaining 24.6 percent of parents rating the previous school above average. We detect a small association ( $\chi^2 = 7.84$ ,  $P < .05$ ) between how parents report the quality of previous schools and their academic priority. We see that a smaller percentage of parents who rated their previous school as above average

report academics as a top priority (57.3 percent) than parents who rated their previous schools as average or below average (65.0 and 65.8 percent respectively). Across racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups of parents we found very similar patterns. We might think of this finding as a potential “push” factor for parents who believed that their previous school was unsatisfactory to leave those schools for a charter school.

Another factor that might push parents to exercise choice options and enroll their child into a charter school could come from displeasure with the academic performance of their child in the previous school. For example if a child is doing poorly in school as measured by parents’ reports of average grades received, parents may feel that their child is not being served academically in that school and seek out a different educational environment for their child in hopes that it will be a better fit and concomitantly will provide for their child doing better academically. It may also be true that parents of students who are doing well academically (as measured by the grades they received in the previous school) may feel dissatisfied with the academic experiences of their child despite receiving good grades and seek out a charter school that they perceive to have higher academic quality.

From Table 4 we can see that parents across average grades received by their child at the previous school of enrollment tend to respond that academics were a top priority for their choice more often than other reasons. A  $\chi^2$  of independence failed to reject the null hypothesis that these two factors are statistically independent ( $\chi^2 = 4.96$ ,  $Pr = .175$ ). We also examined this factor across racial and socioeconomic groups and found no significant differences between these groups of parents and the overall pattern of relationship between previous grades received and rating academics as a top priority.

These patterns seem to indicate that for many parents who chose to switch to a mayoral charter school in Indianapolis, academics or the perception of academic quality was a main impetus for their decisions to switch to charter schools. Further it appears that these perceptions of academics may have acted as both “push” and a “pull” factors in their decisions; perceptions of low academic quality in their previous schools may have “pushed” parents to seek out a different school for their children and perceptions of the academic quality of the charter school in which they eventually enrolled acted to “pull” them to that particular school. Together, the patterns suggest that there is considerable support for the notion that academic reasons are a strong component of parents’ stated preferences for switching and choosing a charter school.

#### Parents and Students’ Revealed Preferences

Do Indianapolis parents’ actual choices of charter schools reinforce their stated preferences from the survey findings? To inform this question we look at a potential indicator of academic quality that could reasonably inform parents’ notions of a school’s academic quality and which is widely available. This indicator is the Average Yearly Progress (AYP) status that is reported publicly every year for all schools under No Child Left Behind provisions. These AYP scores are reported in local news sources as well as on school, district and state websites. If parents are making school choices based on perceived quality (as evidenced in the survey results), then we might expect to see parents making charter school choices that move their children from schools that failed to make AYP to schools that did make AYP, or at the very least they would be making horizontal moves between schools that did make AYP. We investigate this by comparing the AYP status of students previous school (the ‘sending’ school) with the

AYP status of the charter to which they move (the ‘receiving’ school) in the year prior to the move.

To set the context of the AYP landscape among mayoral charters and traditional public schools in Marion County Table 5 presents the total number of schools from each sector that met and did not meet AYP for a given school year from 2002-2003 to 2006-2007. Over time we can see a rise in the number of traditional public schools in Marion County failing to make AYP from a low of 43 percent of schools in 2002-2003 to 60.9 percent of schools in 2006-2007. This pattern may be indicative of the structure of rising AYP targets within the No Child Left Behind system. The first panel of Table 5 shows the introduction of new mayoral charter schools over time (those that have no AYP rating due to being new schools). Further we can see that by the end of the panel in 2006-2007 that like traditional public schools in Marion County, 60.0 percent of the mayoral charters did not meet AYP.

When we look at the patterns of actual moves we see that the vast majority of switchers are moving from schools that failed to make AYP (Table 6). Overall 65.5 percent of students in this sample move from schools that have failed AYP in the school year prior to their switching to a charter school. When looked at by the sector of the sending school (CPS Switcher and TPS Switcher columns in Table 6) we can see that while 67.6 percent of TPS switchers are moving from a school that failed to make AYP only 44.7 percent of CPS switchers are moving from a school that failed to make AYP. Overall these patterns would seem to indicate that there may be a push on parents to move from a poorly performing school and to look for other educational options in charter schools.

When we look at the schools that the students move to, the receiving schools, we see that parents are not moving in large percentages to schools that have passed AYP as expected. Rather, only 29.8 percent (last row, total column; Table 6) of students are moving to charter schools that have passed AYP with 37.7 percent choosing charters that have failed to make AYP and the remaining choosing charters that are too new to have received an AYP designation. Of particular interest in this pattern is the fact that large percentages of students and parents are choosing to move to new charter schools for which they did not have AYP determinations from which to potentially assess a school's quality. This may indicate that parents are utilizing other sources of information with which to gauge the educational quality of charter schools (i.e., visits to the schools, conversations with teachers and administrators, etc). However, it may indicate that while parents indicated in their survey responses overwhelmingly that academic quality was most important, there are other considerations and indications of academic quality, that are not AYP, such as the 'overall reputation of a school.'

When we further disaggregate the data by school level (Elementary and Secondary School Switchers; panels 1 and 2, Table 6) we see that the pattern for elementary school switchers is similar across sectors in that approximately 52 percent of switchers from both CPS and TPS are leaving schools that failed AYP. However for secondary school switchers the vast majority of TPS switchers (89.1 percent) are leaving schools that failed AYP whereas the majority of CPS switchers are leaving schools that passed AYP. This pattern may indicate that an academic "push" for parents out of poor performing schools becomes stronger as children grow older and move into and through secondary school. However this is tempered by the fact that 40.6 percent of secondary school switchers are moving from one AYP failing designated school to another. This may indicate that even though there may be a strong push for parents and

students to leave poorer performing schools, they are largely not choosing to move to higher performing schools (at least as measured by overall AYP status) and that there is a strong possibility that there are other preferences at play in choosing a new school. For example, school safety issues may play a more prominent role in parent and student choices among secondary schools and they are choosing to move to a school that they perceive as being safer than their previous school although it is performing poorly as measured by AYP status. It is important to also remember from Table 5 that over time the percentage of schools failing to meet AYP (both CPS and TPS) has grown and therefore the potential pool of schools to choose from that have met AYP is smaller in later years.

When we look at the average achievement scores of switching students grade level peers in both sending and receiving schools we largely replicate the findings from our investigation of AYP status. For each switcher, a standardized grade level aggregate average achievement<sup>7</sup> was calculated for the semester immediately prior to the student's choice to change schools. This was done for both the sending and receiving school. Figures 3 and 4 present the distribution of standardized differences in mathematics and reading scores between switchers previous school of enrollment and the charter school to which they moved. If parents and students were choosing to move from lower to higher performing schools then we would expect to see observations cluster in the upper right quadrant of the figures. Similar to our investigation of AYP status we see that there is no clear indication or pattern of parents and students making school choices that indicate as high a level of academics as a top priority that were seen in the parent survey data. Approximately 50 percent of parents and students are choosing to move to charter schools that

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<sup>7</sup> Standardization was based on all schools and grades contained in our database for Indiana, representing approximately 750 schools across the state.

have higher average mathematics and reading scores and concomitantly half of them choose a charter school that are relatively lower performing.

### **Conclusions**

Why do parents choose? Overwhelmingly parents indicate that academics are the main driver of their choice of a charter public school in which to enroll their children. However, in this study, as well as in previous studies, it may be that surveys are biased. Therefore, we compare the revealed choices of parents by examining their switching behavior to those espoused in a parent survey. Academics as a reason for choice is less clear when parents' choices are examined in terms of the AYP status; a highly visible and public indicator of 'quality,' of the schools they choose versus the schools they are leaving. The majority of parents and students are leaving traditional public school that did not pass AYP in the year prior to their move (65 percent). This may indicate dissatisfaction on the part of parents and students with the academic quality of their previous school as a possible mechanism for the choice to switch to a charter public school. However, if school quality, at least as indicated by AYP, is a main driver of choices, then we would expect to see parents choosing charter schools that have passed AYP, indicating a move to a 'higher quality' school. This was not the case. Only one third of students on average, across racial-ethnic groups, choose to enroll in a charter that had passed AYP. Most interesting is the finding that 32.5 percent of parents and students choose to enroll in charter schools that are new and therefore have no AYP designation.

Our findings may indicate that parents base their determination of school quality on indicators other than AYP such as the overall reputation of a school. In fact, prior research on school choice clearly indicates that parents rely on informal social networks to collect information to make choices regarding their children's education (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999),

Parents then share information, make interpretations and judgments about what is considered a ‘good school’ from within their social networks. “Accessible, efficient information channels provide some parents -those with higher income and education levels- with broader access to larger social and professional networks of knowledge “ (Smrekar, 2009, P. 400). Thus, some parents may indicate they chose a charter school for academic reasons, but yet they have limited objective information regarding the actual academic state of the school they chose. Howell (2006) reports that few parents understand test score information and are unaware of their school’s AYP status in Massachusetts. “Fully 57% of parents with a child attending a higher performing public school know the school’s status, as compared to just 29% of families with a child in an underperforming school. This is true even though the state has mandated that districts send letters home only to those parents whose children attend underperforming schools advising them of their school’s status. Parents with a child in an underperforming public school are 5 percentage points more likely to claim that they do not know the school’s status and fully 5 times more likely to get it wrong when they claim that they do know” (Howell, 2006, p. 153). Parents may not have access nor understanding of AYP or other test score information, especially for isolated and unemployed parents without access to the internet at a time when the internet is becoming increasingly an important tool in school choice (see Buckley & Schneider, 2003).

Furthermore, researchers have noted that ‘good’ schools and choosing schools for academic reasons may be synonymous for parents. Academics may be a proxy for good schools, including schools that are safe, have smaller class sizes (fewer fights where the teacher knows the child’s name) in a neighborhood that is accessible and free from violence (Smrekar, 2009).

It will be important in future research to unpack what is meant by school academic quality and further to better understand what specifically parents mean by academic quality. When parents speak of academic quality are they speaking of performance on standardized tests or are they referring to particular curricula and pedagogies or an overall impression of the school (e.g., ‘back to basics’ focus on mathematics and reading, emphasis on the arts, or college preparation programs)? If the education and policy communities believe that AYP and other achievement indicators are key to parent choices, renewed efforts of outreach, information and explanation are needed. If rationale choice is the impetus behind school choice, and rationale choices are construed to be switching to schools with higher or better academic achievement, then it is important to reconsider how this information is portrayed to parents so they can and will use it when making enrollment decisions for their children. In contrast, if parent sovereignty in making choices is the yardstick for judging school choice, then there are few criteria for judging what constitutes a good choice, beyond allowing parents to exercise their choice to maximize their own preferences, whatever they may be.

Although the choice patterns presented here do not negate the parents’ self report of academic quality as the main reasons for choosing to switch to a charter school, they do provide evidence that there may be other processes operative in these choices that do not get measured by current surveys due perhaps in part to social desirability of response, method bias, and the difficulty in asking pointed questions on such matters as race and ethnicity and social class.

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## TABLES

Table 1: Mean Parental Socioeconomic Status by School

School	Mean	SD	N
O	-0.759	0.651	97
E	-0.362	0.739	89
J	-0.312	0.736	50
C	-0.303	0.764	131
A	-0.187	0.808	113
I	-0.143	0.871	60
G	-0.120	0.943	63
H	-0.113	0.856	136
M	0.000	0.845	185
F	0.032	0.866	76
B	0.106	0.801	126
D	0.146	0.924	94
K	0.194	0.781	136
N	0.268	0.813	132
L	0.464	0.871	54
Overall	-0.063	0.858	1,542

**Table 2: Proportion of Parents Rating Academic as Top Priority by Grade**

GRADE	ATP	Other Reason	N
K	0.66	0.34	47
1	0.74	0.26	116
2	0.56	0.44	112
3	0.71	0.29	126
4	0.64	0.36	142
5	0.63	0.37	180
6	0.67	0.33	162
7	0.66	0.34	143
8	0.64	0.36	78
9	0.57	0.43	198
10	0.57	0.43	174
11	0.56	0.44	72
Elementary (K-5)	0.66	0.34	723
Middle School (6-8)	0.66	0.34	383
High School (9-12)	0.57	0.43	444
Overall	0.63	0.37	1550

**Table 3: Academics as a Top Priority by Perceptions of the Quality of Previous School for all Parents**

Academics as Top Priority	Quality of Previous School			Total
	Below Average	Average	Above Average	
No	107 (34.2%)	301 (35.0%)	163 (42.7%)	571 (36.7%)
Yes	206 (65.8%)	560 (65.0%)	219 (57.3%)	985 (63.3%)
Total	313	861	382	1,556
Pearson $\chi^2$ (2) = 7.8362 Pr = 0.020, N=1556				

**Table 4: Academics as a Top Priority by Grades Received at Previous School for all Parents**

Academics as Top Priority	Previous Grade				Total
	D or F	C	B	A	
No	75 (40.3%)	178 (38.1%)	152 (32.9%)	92 (33.7%)	497 (35.8%)
Yes	111 (59.7%)	289 (61.9%)	310 (67.1%)	181 (66.3%)	891 (64.2%)
Total	186	467	462	273	1,388
Pearson $\chi^2$ (3) = 4.9584 Pr = 0.175, N=1388					

**Table 5: AYP Status by Year for Charter and Traditional Public Schools in Marion County 2002-2007**

School Year		2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007					
Charter Schools	Did not Meet AYP	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	6	46.2%	9	60.0%		
	Met AYP	1	33.3%	5	83.3%	4	40.0%	4	30.8%		
	No Rating	2	66.7%	1	16.7%	6	60.0%	3	23.1%		
	Total Schools	3		6		10		13			
Marion County TPS	Did not Meet AYP	79	43.4%	93	48.9%	127	63.2%	121	60.5%	120	60.9%
	Met AYP	103	56.6%	97	51.1%	74	36.8%	79	39.5%	77	39.1%
	Total Schools	182		190		201		200		197	

**Table 6: Patterns of choice as a function of AYP status of sending school and receiving school**

	Sending School	Receiving School											
		CPS Switchers				TPS Switchers				Total			
		Failed AYP	Passed AYP	No AYP	Total	Failed AYP	Passed AYP	No AYP	Total	Failed AYP	Passed AYP	No AYP	Total
<b>Elementary School Switchers</b>	<b>Failed AYP</b>	16.1	9.7	25.8	51.6	16.7	16.7	18.5	51.8	16.6	16.0	19.2	51.8
	<b>Passed AYP</b>	9.7	11.3	24.2	45.2	15.2	20.7	12.3	48.2	14.7	19.7	13.5	47.9
	<b>No AYP</b>	0.0	1.6	1.6	3.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.3
	<b>Total</b>	25.8	22.6	51.6	100.0	31.9	37.3	30.8	100.0	31.3	35.8	32.9	100.0
<b>Secondary School Switchers</b>	<b>Failed AYP</b>	15.6	6.3	9.4	31.3	42.6	19.1	27.5	89.1	40.6	18.1	26.1	84.9
	<b>Passed AYP</b>	34.4	25.0	9.4	68.8	4.0	1.5	5.4	10.9	6.2	3.2	5.7	15.1
	<b>No AYP</b>	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	<b>Total</b>	50.0	31.3	18.8	100.0	46.5	20.5	32.9	100.0	46.8	21.3	31.9	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>Failed AYP</b>	16.0	8.5	20.2	44.7	27.6	17.7	22.3	67.6	26.6	16.9	22.1	65.5
	<b>Passed AYP</b>	18.1	16.0	19.1	53.2	10.5	12.6	9.4	32.4	11.1	12.9	10.3	34.3
	<b>No AYP</b>	0.0	1.1	1.1	2.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.2
	<b>Total</b>	40.4	34.0	25.5	100.0	31.7	38.1	30.2	100.0	37.7	29.8	32.5	100.0

## FIGURES

Figure 1: Parent racial demographics by school

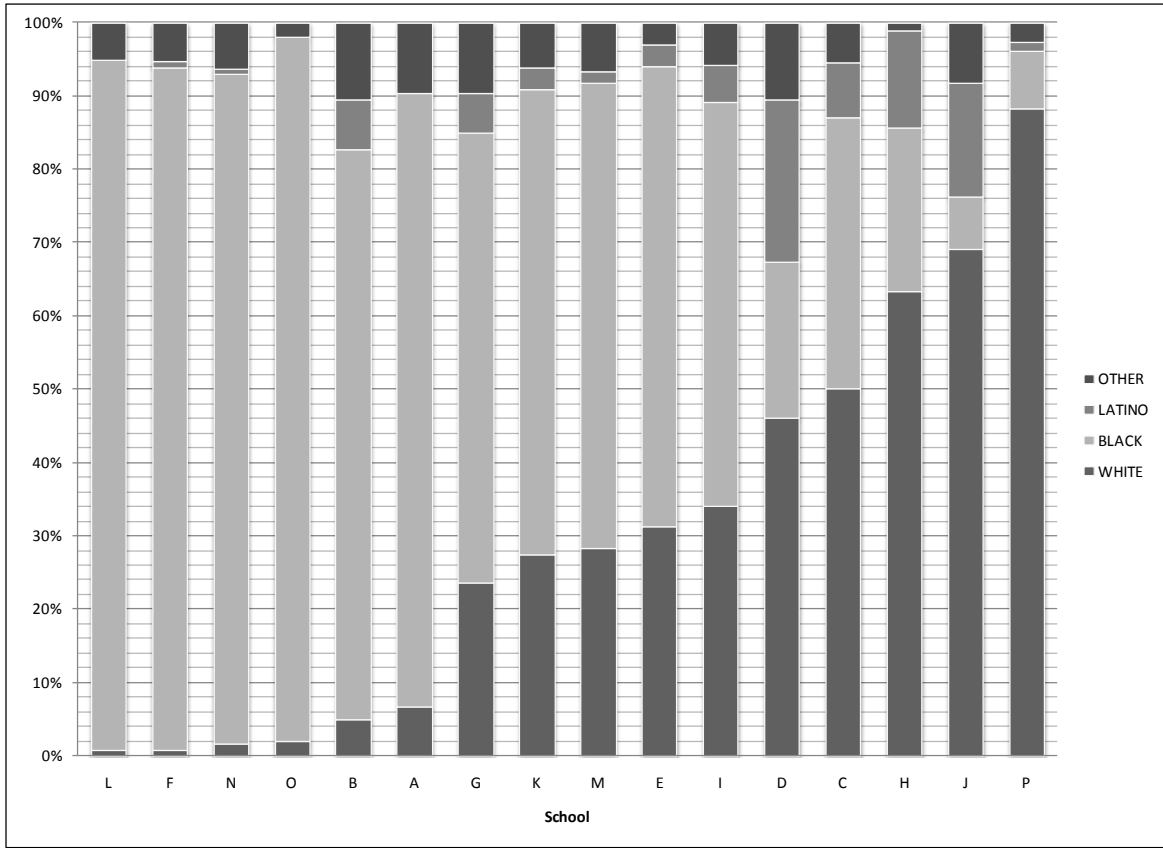
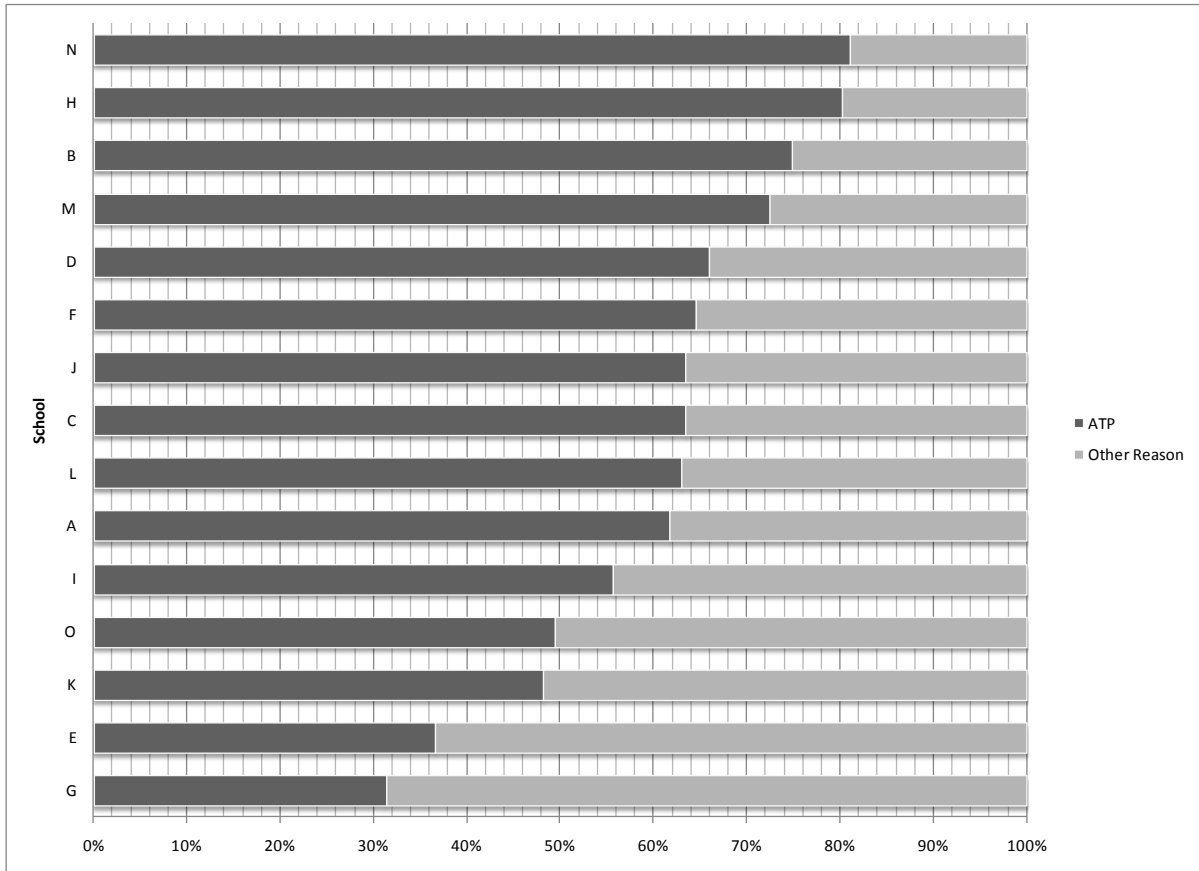
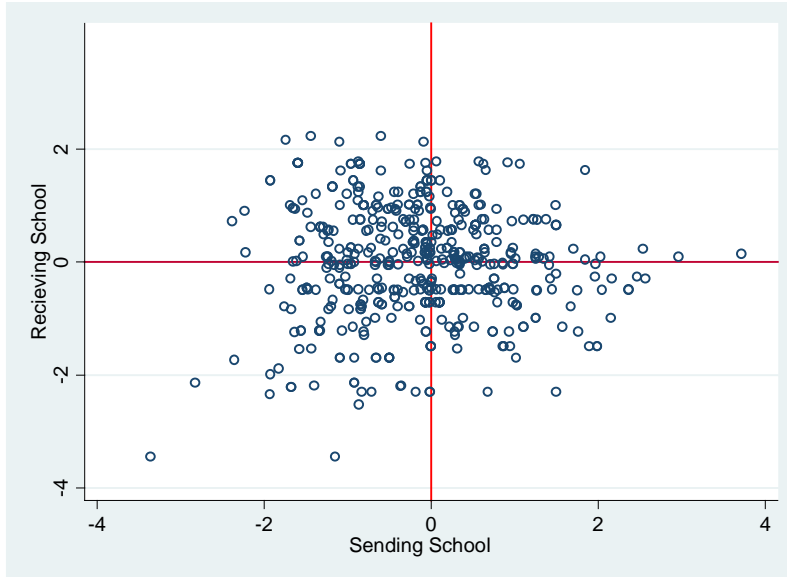


Figure 2: Percentage of Parents Rating Academic as Top Priority by School



**Figure 3: Standardized average mathematics achievement of switching students' grade level in sending and receiving schools**



**Figure 4: Standardized average reading achievement of switching students' grade level in sending and receiving schools**

