Parent feedback and the behavior of private schools participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the behavior of all private schools participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program for 2005-06. We focus on how these schools interact with parents. Three questions motivate the study: How do these schools gather parent feedback? How do they use parent feedback? What school-level factors account for variation in the willingness of schools to reach out to parents and use the feedback that parents supply? In general, our results show that these schools vary tremendously in how they seek and use parent feedback. That variation is systematically related to key measures of school clientele and structural characteristics. Two variables that have particularly notable impacts are the percent of black students that a school serves and the student-teacher ratio. The overall findings illustrate the virtues of reaching beyond comparisons of public and private schools, a focus that has dominated previous empirical work on school choice, and examining variability within the private school population itself.

INTRODUCTION

The research literature on school choice has developed along an ironic conceptual path since the early 1990s. Chubb and Moe (1988; 1990) helped frame the initial discussion by offering an institutional perspective on education policy. Their approach juxtaposes the "politics" that govern public schools with the "markets" that govern private ones. They argue that these two systems produce dramatically different incentives, which create predictable institutional results for schools and different levels of student success, with private school students outperforming their public school counterparts. Subsequent school choice researchers have tended to frame their studies using similar private-public comparisons.

Two major dimensions in the school choice literature illustrate the tendency of researchers to focus on the differences between public and private schools. The first, and perhaps most debated, are studies on student achievement where much disagreement exists over the benefits of private school choice (Chubb and Moe 1990; Witte 1998; Rouse 1998; Greene, Peterson, and Du 1999; Witte 2000; Howell and Peterson 2002; Krueger and Zhu 2004; Peterson and Howell 2004; Braun, Jenkins, and Grigg 2006; Peterson and Llaudet 2006). In contrast, a second point of comparison focusing on parents' attitudes demonstrates much consensus. In studies of publicly and privately funded voucher programs across the United States, scholars and evaluators consistently report that parents express greater satisfaction with their children's private schools than their previous public schools (Greene, Howell, and Peterson 1998; Witte 2000; Gill et al. 2001). These findings also generalize to other contexts, beyond simply a choice of private versus public school, in which parents have chosen their children's schools (Peterson and Hassel 1998).

The irony of previous research is that the institutional perspective that Chubb and Moe articulated has not produced much school choice research examining the institutional behavior of schools. Focusing on student outcomes or parent attitudes is important but does not directly illuminate how school leaders have responded to the incentives grounded in systems based on politics or markets. Researchers examining school behaviors have typically studied indirect measures such as asking parents to report their own experiences or knowledge about school policies, procedures, and improvement efforts (Goldring and Shapira 1993; Bauch and Goldring 1995; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997). Some exceptions to that approach do exist, but they have focused only on public schools. For example, Teske and his collaborators (2001) surveyed school principals and found that the market share of charter schools in a district influenced principals' innovative proposals, their use of time, and their levels of autonomy. Another example is Hess's (2002) case studies of how public schools responded to the competition that school vouchers and charter schools have prompted in Milwaukee and Cleveland.

A focus on comparing public and private schools also deemphasizes the interesting variability that exists within the private school population. While not all public schools are alike, generally speaking private schools exhibit much greater institutional diversity given their ability to craft specialized programs, incorporate religion explicitly into instruction, run as single-sex campuses, and hire and fire staff with relative ease. Still, even if Chubb and Moe (1988; 1990) are correct that all private schools are governed by market forces, it is likely that private schools will not necessarily respond to these forces in same way. Further, variation in those responses

may be related to school characteristics. To date, researchers have not studied that variability systematically. That is partly due to the difficulty of gaining access to comparable data across a large population of private schools.

We have overcome that barrier by developing a unique dataset that examines all private schools participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), the nation's oldest publicly-funded school voucher program, for the 2005-06 school year. We examine the institutional behavior of these schools by focusing on how they interact with parents. Specifically, our data allow us to address three questions: How do private schools in the MPCP gather parent feedback? How do these schools use parent feedback? What school-level factors account for variation in the willingness of schools to reach out to parents and use the feedback that parents supply? These are important questions given the lack of systematic research on private schools that participate in voucher programs. By focusing on variation in private school behaviors, we reach beyond the tendency in the literature to examine public-private comparisons, and simultaneously we provide new insights about private schools' market behavior.

In general, our results show that private schools participating in the Milwaukee voucher program (henceforth, "voucher schools") vary tremendously in the ways they seek and use parent feedback. That variation is systematically related to key measures of school clientele and structural characteristics. Two measures that have particularly notable impacts are the percent of black students that a school serves and the student-teacher ratio. The overall findings illustrate the virtues of reaching beyond comparisons of public and private schools, a focus that has dominated previous work on school choice.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON SCHOOL CHOICE AND THE MARKET BEHAVIOR OF ORGANIZATIONS

Two strands of research suggest different perspectives on how private schools will respond to their parent clients. While it may be true that private schools are more responsive than public schools, that is not our concern. Rather, we focus on how responsiveness is likely to vary within the private school population itself. With that focus, two orientations emerge.

One body of research suggests that private schools will be highly responsive to parents, both in terms of seeking parent feedback and then using it to inform school operations. At least three characteristics of private schools lead to that conclusion. The first and perhaps most cited reason is that competitive marketplace pressures confronting private schools will force them to attend to their parent's needs (Friedman 1962; Chubb and Moe 1988, 1990). This impulse to seek and use parent feedback flows directly from what Hirschman (1970) describes as the "exit" option. Schools cannot force parents to remain their clients. Thus, in private schools there is a "strong bond between consumer satisfaction and organizational well-being. This gives schools incentives to please their clientele, as well as to set up *voice* mechanisms---committees, associations---that build a capacity for responsiveness into organizational structure" (Chubb and Moe 1988, 1068). Thus, because the exit option exists private schools have incentives to give real meaning to parent voice.

A second reason to expect private schools to be generally responsive to parent feedback is the innovative mentality that often drives the leadership of firms in competitive marketplaces

(Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Wilson 1989). Across several sectors of the economy, including education, leaders often find the private sector attractive because it provides frequent opportunities for promoting innovative practices. Listening to consumers is one of the central tendencies of "learning organizations" that constantly seek to improve the quality of their products and their customer service (Senge 1990; Walton 1986). With that mindset, one would expect private school leaders, as innovators, to reach out to their current parents in order to gather ideas about how to improve school performance.

A final reason to expect private schools to seek and use parent feedback is related to the potential dynamism of the education marketplace. Especially with the increasing ability of schools and market researchers to identify potential clients, private schools need to keep abreast of opportunities to attract new parents, not simply maintain the allegiance of current ones. As in markets for other products, multiple customer groups populate the nation's landscape, something that niche marketers have discovered (Garbarino and Johnson 1999). In urban areas especially, where public and private voucher programs and other forms of choice tend to reside, parent populations are often mobile, and students' needs can change frequently as new immigrant or other groups become more visible community members. In fact, market research suggests that consumers in general, even satisfied ones, frequently switch products; and dissatisfied ones sometimes remain loyal to familiar brands (Oliver 1999; Ganesh, Arnold, and Reynolds 2000). Thus, even as they offer their current parents voice mechanisms, as noted above, given the potential and actual dynamism in education markets, private schools appear to have strong incentives to solicit and then use parent feedback as they adjust their programs to increase market share (Carr and Sykes 2005).

Private schools, and especially those participating in voucher programs, can be very diverse institutions (Peterson and Hassel 1998; Witte 2000; Schneider, Teske, and Marschall 2000; Peterson and Campbell 2001; Van Dunk and Dickman 2003). That diversity suggests that among private schools, some are likely to be more responsive to parents than others. Based on previous school choice research, we identify three factors that can contribute to that variability.

First, private schools may be diverse institutions, but parents and students can often be relatively homogenous within any given school. This results from the self-selection process that can occur when parents select their children's schools with an eye toward like-minded others. Coleman and Hoffer (1987) have described this search for "value consistency" as creating "value communities" in private schools. Howell's (2004) finding that religion is a powerful predictor of parent choices underscores this point, and Chubb and Moe (1988, 1080) echo this idea when they note that "It is only reasonable to suggest that a given private school is likely to have clearer and more homogeneous goals than a given public school." Value consistency and relatively focused missions could create environments where schools need to be less aggressively attentive to their parents, given that school officials and parents are of the same mindset. Thus, the selection process that brings parents into a particular school, which may be highly engaging and responsive, may obviate the need for major and ongoing efforts to solicit and then use parent feedback once parents have enrolled their children. Previous research has suggested that in forming their student bodies, private schools participating in the MPCP do counsel out parents who do not appear to buy into school missions (Van Dunk and Dickman 2003).

The capacity of private schools is a second factor that could cause some schools to be more responsive to parents than others. The need to develop routines, mechanisms, and processes to survey and then assimilate customer feedback in systematic ways moves private sector organizations to invest heavily in their own capabilities (Day 1994; Nwankwo 1995). In public education, research has shown that schools and districts often staff up and create bureaucratic capacity to respond to perceived student needs (Smith and Meier 1994). In the private school context, where resources can vary tremendously, it is likely that some schools have more mature and well-funded capabilities than others, which can enhance their ability to solicit parent feedback and then incorporate it into school practices. Sophisticated outreach mechanisms may be required especially when the signals that parents' choices send to schools may not be entirely clear (Manna 2002). The fact that 6 of Milwaukee's financially strapped private schools, which at one time relied heavily on vouchers, have switched to public charter school status, where public subsidies are higher, suggests in concrete terms the financial pressures that some private schools face (Public Policy Forum 2003). When given the choice between purchasing school materials and devoting resources to sophisticated parent outreach mechanisms, it is likely that many schools will choose the former.

A final reason why some private schools might be more responsive to parents than others is that private school bureaucracies, though typically more flexible than public school ones, can possess tendencies that limit or redirect parent feedback. In short, private and public bureaucracies can be vulnerable to similar pathologies (Wilson 1989). In cases where private schools have a specific curricular focus or commitment, as in religious schools, parents may find it difficult if not impossible to win major changes in school operations. Catholic schools, for example, often run under the umbrella of larger church hierarchies, which may limit their responsiveness to parents. Chubb and Moe (1988, 1068) may be correct that Catholic schools operate with much freedom from church overseers, but still, one might expect even limited oversight to be more constraining for Catholic schools than independent private schools where parents may have greater influence over teaching methods, curriculum, and other school activities.[1]

DESCRIBING HOW VOUCHER SCHOOLS SEEK AND USE PARENT FEEDBACK

We analyze private school responsiveness to parent feedback by analyzing data from the nation's oldest public school voucher program, located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was established in 1990 as a relatively small program that began with 7 private schools and 931 students participating (Witte 2000, 56). Amendments to the law governing the program have increased the number of students who can participate and, importantly, also have enabled private religious schools to accept students using public vouchers. By the start of the 2005-06 school year, the program enrolled well over 14,000 students and had 129 schools, religious and non-sectarian, participating.[2]

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[1] Comments from Brenda White, the principal of Milwaukee's St. Margaret Mary School, a participant in the city's voucher program, suggest as much. She has said: "What makes Catholic schools Catholic is how strongly what they're teaching in the classrooms is connected to their mission" (Borsuk 2005). One would not necessarily expect the school to respond to parents who question that mission.

[2] Those totals for 2005-06 come from the authors' calculations based on data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

Our data on private schools participating in the MPCP come from a census conducted by the Public Policy Forum, a non-profit research organization in Milwaukee, for the 2005-06 school year. All private schools participating in the voucher program on October 5, 2005 were mailed on that date a single-page survey and cover letter, along with a copy of the results of the Forum's survey from 2004-05. The packet was addressed to school principals. A self-addressed, stamped envelope was included, with a deadline of October 19, 2005 for returning the survey. Of the 129 schools surveyed, 75 percent returned the survey by the deadline. On October 20, 2005 a reminder letter and replacement copy of the survey were sent to the remaining schools, with a new deadline of October 28, 2005. After that deadline, the 15 unresponsive schools were visited by Forum researchers over the course of a week and their surveys were completed during the visits. One school declined to participate in the census and two schools were found not to be in operation, resulting in fully or partially completed surveys for 126 schools, an overall response rate of 98 percent.

The census form for 2005-06 included three question batteries, which appeared in the following order. The first asked school officials to describe the organizational characteristics of the school itself. Questions asked about basic contact information and school hours, but also about substantive matters such as whether the school had a religious denomination; enrollment numbers; ethnic breakdown of the student body; number of full-time teachers; whether the school provided transportation or before and after school programs; and whether the school administered standardized tests.

The second and third batteries listed several specific ways a school might solicit and then use parent feedback. The respondents were asked to simply check off the items that applied to them. The second battery identified 9 possible methods by which schools might have solicited feedback. It asked school officials "Does your school solicit feedback from parents in any of the following ways?" The options ranged from somewhat traditional contacts, including sending flyers home with students and meetings with a formal parent group, to more time and resource-intensive activities that included interviewing parents, calling parents at home, or asking them to fill out internet surveys. The final battery asked about how the school used that feedback to inform school operations; it asked if there were "Examples where feedback caused administrators or teachers to do any of the following?" The 13 options listed ranged from relatively small actions, including intervening to help an individual student, to more weighty measures, such as hiring or firing staff, creating or eliminating classes, and changing school disciplinary policies.

Results from the second and third batteries reveal that private schools vary tremendously in how they solicit and use parent feedback. Table 1 summarizes the overall totals for each measure. The first part shows that on average schools used 3.25 methods to solicit parent feedback; 20 percent of schools used 5 or more methods and over a third used fewer than 3 methods. Overall the distribution is relatively symmetric. The second part of the table, which summarizes how schools use feedback, is much more skewed to the right. The average number of uses was 3.44, but the table shows that nearly 44 percent of schools used feedback in two or fewer ways; 23 percent of schools said they did not use feedback in any of the ways listed in the census. While some schools reported using feedback to inform several different aspects of

school operations, only 14 percent responded affirmatively to 7 or more of the options appearing in the third battery.

Table 1 about here

Table 2 breaks out the totals from each battery and reveals how the individual items vary. The percentages show that relatively traditional methods of seeking parent feedback tend to be the most popular. The vast majority of schools, 74.6 percent, send flyers home with students and 65.1 percent have school officials meet with a formal organization representing the school's parents. Other more intensive efforts were also present for many, but not most schools: 41.3 percent call parents by telephone; 31.7 percent conduct exit interviews with graduating families; and 24.6 percent interview families who leave the school prior to graduation. Table 2 also shows that parent feedback appears to have consequential impacts in many schools. The most popular use is at the individual level, where 67.5 percent of schools reported that parent feedback led the school to intervene to help an individual student. Also noticeable is that in 49.2 percent of the schools parent feedback led to changes in school extracurricular offerings. Schools also said that feedback influences personnel matters, such as decisions to reward employees (31.0 percent of schools), hire teachers, administrators, or staff (27.8 percent), and, in somewhat rarer cases, fire or sanction an employee (15.1 and 11.1 percent, respectively). Parent feedback also appears to influence curricular matters such as creating classes and choosing textbooks, where 31.0 and 29.4 percent of schools said that parent feedback affected those school decisions.

Table 2 about here

HYPOTHESES ABOUT VOUCHER SCHOOL RESPONSIVENESS TO PARENTS

The results in Tables 1 and 2 show that voucher schools vary in how they solicit and use parent feedback. What might explain that variation? In this section, we consider several hypotheses that draw upon our earlier discussion of private school differences. We consider two categories of these characteristics, client base and programmatic structure, that help us generate several hypotheses about school responsiveness to parent feedback.

The first set of hypotheses focuses on the nature of each school's clientele. We expect that schools with more diverse student bodies will be more likely to solicit parent feedback and more likely to act upon it. Schools that draw students from many different racial backgrounds may lack the clear focus of a more racially homogeneous school. Parent expectations would be more likely to vary in a community that is less racially coherent. That would create incentives for schools to attend more to parent concerns because school officials could not rely as much on the process of self-selection to create a relatively homogenous school population. To test this hypothesis, we use an index of racial diversity, popular in state politics research (Sullivan 1973; Hero and Tolbert 1996; Hero 1998), that ranges from 0, representing a school with students all sharing the same race, to 1, which would represent a school where all students were of a different race.

Our next hypothesis is somewhat in tension with the theory motivating the first expectation (Coleman and Hoffer 1987), but it derives from the particular empirical case of the MPCP and other cities with similar demographic characteristics (Henig et al. 1999; Witte 2000;

Hess 2002; Van Dunk and Dickman 2003). Much of the motivation behind the MPCP was to meet the pressing educational needs of the city's African-American students. Many of the program's initial supporters were African-American, including state representative Polly Williams and former Milwaukee superintendent Howard Fuller, who continues to be a strong advocate. Since the MPCP began, Milwaukee's public school population has been overwhelmingly black.[3] Those facts, and the well-documented achievement gaps between black students and whites (Jencks and Phillips 1998), suggest that one of the MPCP's key goals has been to improve the educational opportunities for African-American youngsters. That does not mean it aims to serve these students at the expense of others; still, given the historical educational disadvantages that Milwaukee's black students have experienced and the city's large black community, clearly there is evidence that black students' success is an especially high priority. We suspect that overall program commitment to carry over to individual schools as well. Therefore, we hypothesize that as the percent of black students in a school increases the school will be more likely to seek and use parent feedback.

The next expectation about school clientele concerns how much the school depends on students using vouchers. An important feature of the program is that the number of vouchers is capped at 22,500. With several schools competing for a finite, albeit somewhat large, number of voucher program participants, schools that rely heavily on voucher money will likely make strong efforts to reach out to parents. Thus, we expect schools with a high percentage of voucher students to be more likely to seek and use parent feedback.

A final consideration regarding school clientele focuses on school popularity. Some private schools will be more in demand than others. In an attempt to gain market share, schools with many open seats may be more willing to reach out to families with different backgrounds and interests. With a more inviting marketing strategy, and a desire to build additional parent support through positive word-of-mouth evaluations, these schools would have incentives to seek and then use feedback. That logic suggests that schools operating at higher levels of capacity would be less likely to seek and then use parent feedback. We test this hypothesis with a variable measuring the percent of seats at each school that are filled.

The second set of hypotheses focus on programmatic structures. Here we begin with the schools' substantive focus. Specifically, we expect that schools with religious affiliations will be less likely to solicit parent feedback and less likely to act upon it. As an organizational matter, schools with a specific faith commitment will likely have less room to respond to parent concerns about school practices. This would be especially likely in matters of curriculum or classroom instruction. Self-selection into religious schools would also likely reduce the need to for these schools to be highly responsive once parents have enrolled their children. A parent who did not want his child learning with a Catholic curriculum would probably not choose such a school in the first place. Schools that lack a religious component to instruction will likely be more flexible organizations open to parent suggestions. We measure this factor using an indicator variable coded 1 if the school has a religious affiliation, and 0 otherwise.

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[3] For example, according to the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data, http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/, during the 2004-05 school year, approximately 52 percent of Milwaukee's 170,998 residents under 18 years of age were black. (Accessed on October 17, 2006.)

Another structural matter is the number of grade levels, including kindergarten and pre-kindergarten, that a school serves. Schools that serve more grade levels suggest a less coherent overall school community given that elementary school parents may very well have different concerns than middle or high school ones. Thus, we expect schools serving more grade levels to be more likely to seek and use parent feedback.

School size is also a relevant consideration. Our literature review seems to suggest somewhat conflicting expectations on this issue. Seeking parent feedback can be difficult administrative work that strains school resources. Therefore, one might expect larger schools to be more likely to seek parent feedback because they may enjoy economies of scale or less taxed resources that would make that process easier. At the same time, though, large schools tend to be more bureaucratic, which ironically may make them less likely to respond to feedback once it has been gathered. We measure school size using the number of students enrolled in each school.

A school's ability to meet individual students' needs suggests another structural element worth examining, the student-to-teacher ratio. As a practical matter, more students in a class makes it more difficult for teachers to tailor their instruction. Further, increasing student-to-teacher ratios is one method that a school might use if it were facing resource shortages. Both of these realities suggest that as the student-to-teacher ratio increases, schools will be less likely to seek and use parent feedback. With resources stretched to simply meet the daily classroom needs of students, schools may have little slack to reach out to parents in an energetic way.

Our final structural hypothesis centers on the school's history with the MPCP. To examine this issue, we include a variable measuring the number of years the school has participated in the program. As in our discussion of school size, our literature review leaves us uncertain about what to expect. On one hand, due to organizational capacity, schools that have participated in the choice program for more years could be more likely to seek and act upon parent feedback. The reason is that more mature organizations are more likely to overcome the administrative startup costs associated with participating in a government program. A school's extensive program knowledge, based on years of experience, could free up resources that the school could use to seek and use parent input. On the other hand, one might expect schools with long program histories to develop well-known reputations that could facilitate self-selection and in turn create more homogenous value communities. If that were true, then schools with more experience in the program might be less likely to seek and use parent feedback because school and parent expectations would be essentially in harmony.

EXPLAINING VOUCHER SCHOOLS' RESPONSIVENESS TO PARENT FEEDBACK

We use two types of models to analyze how voucher schools seek and use parent feedback. For one type, our dependent variables are a count of the methods that schools employ to seek feedback, and a count of the ways that schools use that feedback. Recall that Table 1 summarizes those variables. Because they are measured as discrete counts, we analyze their variation using negative binomial regressions and the independent variables we summarized in the previous section. Those two models enable us to examine the overall level of school responsiveness to parents. The second type of model involves dependent variables capturing the individual methods schools use to seek parent feedback and the specific ways they respond to it.

We use the items from Table 2 in a series of logit regressions where the dependent variable is coded 1 if the school engaged in the behavior (either seeking or using feedback in the specified ways) and 0 otherwise. Table 3 presents descriptive statistics on all independent variables.

Table 3 about here

The two regressions in Table 4 analyze the number of ways that schools seek and then use parent feedback. We find support for two of our expectations. First, the percent of black students helps to account for variation in both the number of methods schools use to seek parent input and the number of ways that they use it. That finding is notable because the percent of black students is the only variable systematically related to both the seeking and using feedback behaviors of schools. Additionally, the student-to-teacher ratio measure does not help to predict the number of methods schools use, but it is related, in the expected direction, to the number of ways that schools use feedback. A larger student-to-teacher ratio is associated with less school responsiveness, which may suggest that these schools face capacity challenges that limit their ability to incorporate parent feedback.

Interestingly, and contrary to expectations, we find that schools with larger percentages of students using vouchers are actually less likely to seek parent input and are neither more or less likely to use it. Further, and also contrary to expectations, we find that schools with religious affiliations are actually more likely to use parent feedback, but are neither more or less likely to seek it. That finding is consistent with Chubb and Moe's (1988) claim that in practice religiously-affiliated schools, in particular Catholic ones, are less constrained by church hierarchies than one might expect.

Table 4 about here

Table 5 breaks out the overall counts to examine the individual methods schools use to seek parent feedback. To facilitate discussion, we consider these methods as traditional or more aggressive, with the latter requiring a more intense commitment of school time and financial resources. With rare exceptions, which we will discuss in a moment, it is interesting to note that most of the independent variables are related either to the traditional or the more aggressive methods, but not both. And in most cases, the independent variables have inconsistent impacts across the nine methods of seeking feedback that we examined.

The one exception to this general pattern, and a finding that supports our expectations, is for the student-teacher ratio variable. We find that schools with higher student-teacher ratios are more likely to rely on traditional methods of seeking feedback, and less likely to rely on more aggressive, and more capacity-intensive ones. Specifically, schools with higher student-teacher ratios are more likely to send flyers home with students and rely on a formal parent organization for feedback, and they are less likely to make phone calls home and send parents email surveys.

Two other patterns, which run counter to our hypotheses, emerge from Table 5 as well. The first is that schools with higher enrollments are actually more likely to use aggressive methods to seek parent feedback; as schools fill to capacity, they are more likely to interview their graduates, send email surveys home, and ask parents to complete internet surveys. That

finding suggests that leaders in these schools may believe that they have become parent and student favorites because of their aggressive outreach, and so they make extra strong efforts to maintain this edge. The second pattern is that schools with more students using vouchers are actually less likely to conduct interviews with families of graduates and those who leave before finishing their course of study. That finding clashes with previous research on learning organizations, which predicts that organizations in competitive environments are likely to crave feedback from their clients (Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Senge 1990; Walton 1986). It is true that all schools in our study operate in such an environment, but we expected those that rely heavily on vouchers to feel an even greater sense of urgency to seek parent feedback. However, our findings do not support that view.

Table 5 about here

Table 6 examines the individual ways that schools use parent feedback. As in Table 5, we consider several groups of school behaviors: those that illustrate responsiveness to student needs and interests; curriculum and teaching matters; school policies; and personnel matters. Three patterns, consistent with our expectations, appear to stand out. First, schools with higher percentages of black students are more likely to be responsive across all four categories of policies that we identify. Specifically, as the percent of black students increases, schools are more likely to respond to parent feedback by intervening to help an individual student, choose textbooks, change teaching methods, change discipline policies, and reward employees. These results provide evidence that attending to the particular needs of African-American students and their families is a key focus of schools participating in the program.

Second, schools tend to be more responsive to parents if they serve more grade levels. The more fragmented interests of parents with children across multiple grade levels may create a greater need for schools to respond to parent concerns. The findings show that schools serving more grade levels are more likely to respond to parents across all four categories in Table 6. Specifically, these schools are more likely to intervene to help an individual student, to change teaching methods, to change discipline policies, and to incorporate parent feedback when making hiring decisions.

Finally, the capacity burdens facing schools with high student-teacher ratios makes these schools less likely to respond to parent feedback across three of the four categories in Table 6. As student-teacher ratios increase, schools are less likely to use parent feedback to change teaching methods, change schedules, and reward employees. The teaching methods and scheduling effects also suggest a bureaucratic explanation for these findings. The logic supporting that claim is that schools with many more students than teachers are likely wary of disrupting bureaucratic routines that may help the school to function given its present level of personnel.

Table 6 about here

IMPLICATIONS

Private school advocates and scholars of education policy frequently note the diverse array of options available to parents who send their children to private schools (Coleman and

Hoffer 1987; Chubb and Moe 1990; Peterson and Hassel 1998). Those options are valuable because they enable schools to attend to the particular needs of students and families, helping many students to succeed when other school arrangements would either hold them back or discourage them altogether. That variety in the private sector is in sharp contrast with public schools that, with some exceptions, by and large are very similar in their design and operation (Tyack 1974; Tyack and Cuban 1995).

As the results in this paper show, there is much to learn from the variability present within the private market for education. Unfortunately, most studies in the school choice literature to date have stressed private versus public school comparisons. And further, they have tended to focus on student outcomes, such as test scores, and parent opinions, measured primarily as expressions of school satisfaction. The goal of that work has been to examine potential differences between schools responding to market incentives and schools driven more by political forces. While those studies speak to the important policy question of whether the United States should expand competitive markets for schools, they tend to ignore the interesting variability within the private school community itself. They also ignore the institutional behavior of private schools. Those are important areas to study given the assumptions about how expanded markets for education are likely to operate.

Even though all private schools are market actors, given their diversity, one would not expect them all to navigate their markets in the same way. Our results demonstrate that fact. In this paper we have focused on one aspect of private sector variability, how schools seek and then use parent feedback. There are many more dimensions of school behavior that one might consider, and we encourage others to examine them. For now, we conclude with these thoughts.

We believe our results are an important first step, but far from the final word, on how voucher schools seek and then use parent feedback. There are many ways to improve upon what we have done so far. For example, an ideal research design would monitor school behaviors, school clientele, and school structure over time to examine the dynamic relationships present in markets for education. Lacking those over-time measures, we settled on a cross-sectional analysis that nevertheless we believe provides useful insights about school behavior.

Further, it is likely that school behavior varies within each of the 9 methods for seeking parent feedback and the 13 ways of using it that we have examined. In some schools, using parent feedback to choose textbooks, for example, may be an elaborate process where parents are invited to peruse potential titles and even meet with book publishers. Alternatively, it could entail simply alerting parents to the books the school proposes to use and then asking them to express their opinions or to suggest titles that come to mind. Clearly, these behaviors require different levels of school commitment and resources. A more in-depth case analysis of how schools solicit and use feedback would likely uncover even more interesting variability to explain. That variability could include classroom level differences, where individual teachers may be highly attentive to parent feedback, which is something that our survey, targeted to school administrators, did not explore in detail.

It is also interesting to see, as Table 1 demonstrates, that over 35 percent of schools use 2 or fewer methods for seeking parent feedback, and over 40 percent respond to it in 2 or fewer

ways. Those numbers may clash with simplistic views of private schools' market behavior, which envision private schools with an intense customer focus that always seeks to please their clientele through a process of continuous improvement. These findings do not suggest that schools are necessarily inattentive to their customers; rather, the self-selection process in which parents choose schools may obviate the need for the kind of hyper-attentiveness that some might otherwise expect.

The relative inattentiveness of some schools also underscores the fact that public and private schools are both bureaucracies that establish routines and struggle to use available resources. The findings from Tables 4, 5, and 6 on the student-teacher ratio measure is instructive here. Those results show that schools with many more students than teachers are more likely to use traditional methods for seeking parent input, less likely to use more aggressive methods to seek input, and less likely to incorporate parent feedback into their daily operation. Even though we have only examined private schools, we would speculate that many public school officials would agree that high student-teacher ratios also constrain their ability to respond to parent concerns. Thus, even though theories of markets and politics predict that private and public schools will behave differently, both kinds of schools may still experience similar bureaucratic constraints that influence their behavior in similar ways.

In closing, two overall points seem to emerge. First, private schools vary tremendously in how they seek and use parent feedback, and that variability is systematically related to key measures of school clientele and structural characteristics. Second, private schools are bureaucracies that attempt to respond to parents while simultaneously attending to the internal needs of their own organizations. That can be a tough balance to engineer, especially because private school parents are free to send their children elsewhere. How schools manage what Hirschman (1970) calls parent "voice" is a nuanced activity that simple characterizations of private schools as market actors only begins to capture.

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Table 1. Summary of how voucher schools seek and use parent feedback

Seeking feedback		Using feedback	
Number of ways schools seek feedback	Percent of schools	Number of ways schools use feedback	Percent of schools
0	5.6	0	18.3
1	11.1	1	11.1
2	20.6	2	14.3
3	22.2	3	11.9
4	19.1	4	8.7
5	7.9	5	15.9
6	7.1	6	6.4
7	4.0	7	4.0
8	1.6	8	4.0
9	0.8	9	3.2
		10	0.0
		11	0.8
		12	1.6

N=126 for the "seeking" and "using" counts. For seeking feedback, the mean=3.25 and standard deviation=1.89. For using feedback, the mean=3.44 and standard deviation=2.82.

Table 2. Specific ways that voucher schools seek and use parent feedback

	Percent of schools
Seeking parent feedback	
Send flyers home with students	74.6
Meet with formal parent organization	65.1
Mail flyers home	49.2
Call parents	41.3
Interview graduating families	31.7
Interview families leaving before graduation	24.6
Suggestion box at school	19.0
Have parents complete internet surveys	13.5
Email parents	6.3
Using parent feedback	
Intervene to help a particular student	67.5
Create extracurricular activities	49.2
Create classes	31.0
Reward employee	31.0
Choose textbooks	29.4
Hiring decision	27.8
Change teaching method	23.0
Change scheduling policies	23.0
Change student discipline policies	19.0
Firing decision	15.1
Sanction employee, short of firing	11.1
Eliminate classes	9.5
Eliminate extracurricular activities	7.1

N=126 for all rows.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for independent variables

	N	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
School clientele					
Diversity index	119	0.22	0.23	0	0.73
Percent black	120	62.70	40.89	0	100
Percent using voucher	118	51.81	27.59	1.67	100
Enrollment percent	118	73.08	21.97	16	101.83
School structure					
Religious affiliation	126	0.71	0.46	0	1
Number of grade levels	128	8.55	3.23	2	14
Number of students	126	200.37	201.66	0	1275
Student-teacher ratio	115	14.82	5.44	3	36
Years in the MPCP	126	6.18	3.20	1	16

Note: See Tables 1 and 2 for descriptive statistics on the dependent variables.

Table 4. Analyzing how voucher schools seek and use parent feedback

	Methods to seek parent feedback	Ways of using parent feedback
School clientele		
Diversity index	-0.28	0.21
	(-0.80)	(0.40)
Percent black	**0.00****	**0.01*****
	(2.16)	**(3.45)**
Percent using voucher	**-0.01***	-0.00
	(-1.77)	(-0.31)
Enrollment percent	0.01	0.00
	(1.54)	(0.10)
School structure		
Number of grade levels	-0.15	0.04
	(-1.19)	(1.58)
Religious affiliation	0.00	**0.39***
	(0.00)	**(1.92)**
Number of students	-0.00	0.00
	(-0.11)	(0.90)
Student-teacher ratio	-0.01	**-0.03****
	(-1.01)	**(-2.01)**
Years in MPCP	-0.00	-0.01
	(-0.07)	(-0.37)
Model constant	1.16***	0.24
	(4.05)	(0.48)
Log likelihood	-203.59	-231.51
Model chi-square	14.11	18.69**
Pseudo R-square	0.03	0.04

N=105. *p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01. Models are negative binomial regressions with robust standard errors run in Stata 9 SE. Cells present unstandardized regression coefficients and z-statistics in parenthesis. The dependent variable for the "seek" model is a count of the number of ways that schools seek parent input. The dependent variable in the "using" model is a count of the number of ways that schools use parent input.

Table 5. Analyzing how voucher schools seek parent feedback

	Traditional methods				More aggressive methods				
	Flyer with child	Mail flyer home	Parent group	Suggestion box	Interview grads	Interview leavers	Call home	Email home	Internet survey
School clientele									
Diversity index	-1.86	**-2.32***	1.87	0.31	-0.93	-1.91	0.29	-0.71	0.70
	(-1.33)	**(-1.67)**	(1.42)	(0.22)	(-0.70)	(-1.11)	(0.23)	(-0.22)	(0.46)
Percent black	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	**0.02****	0.01	-0.00	-0.00
	(0.81)	(1.56)	(0.21)	(1.13)	(1.57)	**(2.17)**	(1.22)	(-0.41)	(-0.19)
Percent using voucher	-0.01	-0.01	-0.00	-0.00	**-0.04****	**-0.03***	0.02	-0.00	-0.02
	(-1.01)	(-0.89)	(-0.36)	(-0.01)	**(-2.37)**	**(-1.67)**	(0.96)	(-0.20)	(-1.14)
Enrollment percent	0.00	0.03	0.01	-0.01	**0.04****	0.02	-0.03	**0.05***	**0.04****
	(0.08)	(1.58)	(0.33)	(-0.68)	**(1.98)**	(0.99)	(-1.40)	**(1.72)**	**(2.26)**
School structure									
Religious affiliation	-0.76	**-1.02***	-0.60	-0.31	0.28	0.48	-0.37	0.44	-0.90
	(-0.95)	**(-1.82)**	(-1.17)	(-0.43)	(0.47)	(0.80)	(-0.64)	(0.34)	(-1.57)
Grade levels served	0.06	-0.03	**0.15****	0.14	-0.02	0.00	-0.09	0.12	**-0.19***
	(0.58)	(-0.36)	**(2.03)**	(1.28)	(-0.20)	(0.00)	(-1.07)	(0.53)	**(-1.72)**
Number of students	**-0.00***	0.00	0.00	0.00	**-0.00****	-0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	(-1.66)	(0.72)	(0.62)	(0.62)	**(-2.08)**	(-0.85)	(0.23)	(1.36)	(0.68)
Student-teacher ratio	**0.10***	-0.04	**0.09****	-0.07	-0.04	-0.04	**-0.08***	**-0.30*****	-0.05
	(1.76)	(-0.81)	**(1.98)**	(-1.35)	(-0.85)	(-0.85)	**(-1.65)**	**(-2.78)**	(-1.01)
Years in MPCP	0.01	0.01	-0.07	-0.07	0.07	0.14	-0.06	-0.10	-0.10
	(0.07)	(0.13)	(-0.82)	(-0.64)	(0.86)	(1.58)	(-0.68)	(-0.47)	(-1.06)
Model constant	1.06	-0.22	-1.87	-1.12	-1.56	-2.28*	2.54**	-3.51*	-0.87
	(0.54)	(-0.18)	(-1.44)	(-0.89)	(-1.32)	(-1.82)	(1.97)	(-1.67)	(-0.43)
Log likelihood	-48.38	-62.27	-61.12	-46.69	-61.28	-52.34	-58.82	-19.17	-34.32
Model chi-square	16.54*	13.87	12.23	8.45	8.24	11.60	17.36**	25.91***	15.00*
Pseudo r-square	0.14	0.14	0.09	0.09	0.08	0.09	0.17	0.25	0.20

N=105. *p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01. Models are logit regressions with robust standard errors run in Stata 9 SE. Cells present unstandardized regression coefficients and z-statistics in parenthesis. Dependent variables are coded 1 if the school used the designated method to seek parent feedback, and 0 otherwise.

Table 6. Analyzing how voucher schools use parent feedback

	Student needs and interests			*Curriculum and teaching*				*Policies*		*Personnel matters*			
	Help a student	Create extra-curr.	Eliminate extra-curr.	Create class	Eliminate class	Choose texts	Change methods	Change discipline	Change schedule	Hiring decision	Firing decision	Reward employee	Sanction employee
School clientele													
Diversity index	1.70	0.48	0.60	0.04	-3.06	-0.63	-0.93	**3.21***	0.59	-1.17	**-3.65***	3.34	0.55
	(1.31)	(0.40)	(0.16)	(0.03)	(-0.82)	(-0.45)	(-0.63)	**(1.80)**	(0.44)	(-0.85)	**(-1.81)**	(1.53)	(0.27)
Percent black	**0.02****	0.01	0.01	0.01	-0.00	**0.01***	**0.03****	**0.05*****	0.01	0.01	0.01	**0.04*****	0.01
	(2.47)	(1.39)	(0.63)	(0.94)	(-0.00)	**(1.92)**	**(2.52)**	**(2.68)**	(1.15)	(0.81)	(1.20)	**(2.84)**	(0.49)
Percent using voucher	0.00	0.02	-0.02	-0.00	-0.02	**-0.03***	-0.01	-0.03	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.02
	(0.08)	(1.23)	(-0.59)	(-0.15)	(-1.08)	**(-1.91)**	(-0.23)	(-1.21)	(0.04)	(0.31)	(0.23)	(0.01)	(0.86)
Enrollment percent	0.01	-0.03	0.04	0.01	0.02	0.02	-0.00	0.03	0.00	-0.01	-0.02	0.01	-0.03
	(0.85)	(-1.50)	(1.19)	(0.76)	(1.04)	(1.32)	(-0.08)	(1.57)	(0.09)	(-0.45)	(-0.71)	(0.37)	(-1.39)
School structure													
Religious affiliation	**0.13***	0.06	0.04	0.10	0.15	0.09	0.08	0.05	-0.00	0.12	0.03	-0.05	0.00
	(1.77)	(0.82)	(0.41)	(1.29)	(1.02)	(0.96)	(0.86)	(0.60)	(-0.01)	(1.62)	(0.32)	(-0.52)	(0.02)
Grade levels served	**1.04***	0.92	-0.57	-0.11	0.68	0.86	**1.25***	**1.19***	0.44	**1.97****	0.59	0.39	-0.57
	(1.91)	(1.63)	(-0.55)	(-0.18)	(0.88)	(1.39)	**(1.86)**	**(1.68)**	(0.65)	**(2.49)**	(0.68)	(0.57)	(-0.67)
Number of students	0.00	0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.00	**-0.00***	0.00	-0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.00	**0.00***	0.00
	(0.58)	(1.21)	(1.23)	(-0.04)	(0.85)	**(-1.69)**	(0.11)	(-0.07)	(0.37)	(-0.49)	(0.44)	**(1.72)**	(0.60)
Student-teacher ratio	-0.05	0.01	0.02	-0.06	-0.02	-0.07	**-0.16*****	-0.02	**-0.12****	-0.06	0.01	**-0.13*****	-0.04
	(-1.13)	(0.22)	(0.38)	(-1.24)	(-0.21)	(-1.44)	**(-2.84)**	(-0.47)	**(-2.00)**	(-1.19)	(0.19)	**(-2.64)**	(-0.71)
Years in MPCP	**-0.15***	0.06	**-0.34***	-0.08	-0.21	0.07	**0.18***	-0.03	0.13	-0.17	0.12	-0.15	0.13
	(-1.82)	(0.77)	**(-1.95)**	(-0.94)	(-1.62)	(0.80)	**(1.75)**	(-0.24)	(1.52)	(-1.58)	(1.30)	(-1.47)	(1.27)
Model constant	-2.04*	-1.98*	-3.70**	-1.72	-3.00	-2.24*	-3.43**	-7.50***	-1.73	-1.55	-2.96**	-3.24*	-1.74
	(-1.65)	(-1.75)	(-2.44)	(-1.41)	(-1.59)	(-1.92)	(-2.07)	(-3.93)	(-1.36)	(-1.23)	(-2.16)	(-1.79)	(-1.21)
Log likelihood	-56.18	-66.81	-24.73	-59.95	-29.70	-56.63	-43.03	-42.23	-51.07	-51.55	-36.88	-50.26	-36.10
Model chi-square	14.27	10.17	15.14*	6.52	5.60	10.05	19.84**	16.22*	9.01	15.76*	13.12	19.71**	10.78
Pseudo R-square	0.14	0.07	0.13	0.05	0.10	0.08	0.20	0.15	0.07	0.15	0.14	0.20	0.08

N=105. *p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01. Models are logit regressions with robust standard errors run in Stata 9 SE. Cells present unstandardized regression coefficients and z-statistics in parenthesis. Dependent variables are coded 1 if the school used parent feedback in the designated way, and 0 otherwise.