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Parents, Choice, and Some Foundations for Education Reform in Massachusetts

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FOREWORD

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is the federal government's first serious attempt to hold the nation's public schools accountable for their performance. It requires that the states set rigorous academic standards, test students annually, and impose consequences on schools that are found to be underperforming.

Among the consequences for underperforming schools is that their students gain the right to transfer to other public schools within the same district. This provision was a conscious attempt by the designers of NCLB to harness the power of school choice to the cause of school accountability. The idea is not simply that students in underperforming schools should be able to escape to better schools, important as that may be. It is also that choice has the capacity to change the incentives at the heart of the entire school system. When kids are allowed to leave underperforming schools, all public schools are put on notice that they will lose students and lose money if they don't teach children what they are supposed to know, and these sanctions give the schools new—and hopefully compelling—reasons for improving their performance.

But will choice work as the designers of NCLB intended? Putting aside the kind of foot-dragging that can be expected from school districts (and that, at least in principle, the Department of Education can do something about through strict enforcement of the law), the answers turn in large measure on the key role of parents in the choice process. Clearly, choice is likely to have its most beneficial impacts if parents are well informed about the performance of their kids' schools, well informed about the schools they might switch to, and concerned enough about quality education to make choices on that basis. If these things are not substantially true, children may remain in underperforming schools even when parents have better options, and schools may have little added incentive to do their jobs well.

There is hardly any research thus far on NCLB, so these basic facts about what parents know and value are not well understood. William G. Howell's new study, undertaken with the Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research, is an attempt to do something about that. Based on a detailed survey of 1,000 urban Massachusetts parents, Howell's data and analysis go a long way toward identifying the actual conditions that shape the operation of choice within NCLB. Among his findings are the following:

- Seventy-one percent of parents with children in underperforming schools do not know that the schools are underperforming, and so do not know that they qualify for choice.
- Seventy-three percent of parents with children in underperforming schools see the schools' performance as quite good, giving them As or Bs overall.
- Most parents with children in underperforming schools are nonetheless interested in switching schools, and 45 percent say they would like to put their child in a private school, which is far and away the most preferred option.
- Parents with children in underperforming schools place the highest value on educational quality when choosing a school, and not on such factors as ethnicity of the student body, school location, or sports teams.

There are positive signs here. Parents have the right values, and they are interested in having and exercising new options. But unless districts communicate information more effectively, the vast majority of parents will not know whether their children's schools are underperforming, will not know enough to be dissatisfied, and will not even know that they qualify for choice. Under these conditions, the choice component is unlikely to prove very effective in promoting NCLB's laudable goals. The solution, Howell argues, is for the federal and state governments to ensure that parents *are* informed about these things, and also to expand the range of choice to include private schools—which are currently not allowed, but which parents clearly find most attractive. Both would shore up the foundations of choice. And in so doing, they would greatly strengthen its contribution to NCLB.

Howell's research is precisely the kind of empirical work that needs to be done to inform and guide the nation's reform efforts, and to ensure that the most promising reforms of the last decade—choice and accountability—are put to their most effective use in improving our schools.

—Terry M. Moe

Terry M. Moe is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, a member of its Koret Task Force on K–12 Education, and William Bennett Munro professor of political science at Stanford University. He co-authored *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, which has been a major force in the movement for school choice in America and abroad, and is the author of *Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public*, the first detailed analysis of public opinion on the voucher issue. In addition, he is editor of *Private Vouchers*, the first book on the growing movement among private-sector foundations to provide vouchers for low-income children.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Parents are the linchpins in any school choice initiative, be it vouchers, intra- or inter-district public school choice, or a voluntary desegregation plan. What parents know about and want for their child's education critically defines the level of interest in school choice and hence sets in motion (or not) all of the possibilities for competitive pressures and systemic change that reform-minded advocates espouse. If parents are basically satisfied with their child's teacher and school, if they have insufficient information about alternative schooling options, or if they express little desire to disrupt their child's current education, then choice initiatives will not get off the ground.

The choice provisions of the recently enacted No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) are no exception. Under NCLB, states must develop academic proficiency standards and then determine whether public schools are making "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) toward achieving them. Students attending schools that fail to make AYP for two consecutive years have the option of switching to a public school within the district that has achieved AYP. Students attending schools that fail to make AYP for three consecutive years can use their Title I funding for supplemental tutoring services. Thereafter, the state may eventually restructure and/or reconstitute an entire school.

During the 2002-2003 school year, 983,313 students were enrolled in Massachusetts public schools, of whom 95,458 qualified for NCLB's public school choice provisions. In that year, just 298 students, or 0.3 percent of the eligible population, seized the opportunity to switch to a higher-performing public school. In part, low take-up rates are the intended result of the obstructionist behaviors of state and local bureaucrats, superintendents, and school board members, each of whom has a vested interest in minimizing NCLB's impact on a district by keeping children in their current public schools. Transportation issues and space limitations, meanwhile, prevent still other students from switching public schools. As with all choice initiatives, NCLB does not mandate change—it merely presents some public school parents with new education options. Whether these parents will take advantage of these options and whether they can adequately assess the best interests and needs of their children when doing so remain open questions.

Drawing from a telephone survey of 1,000 public school parents in Massachusetts' ten largest school districts, this paper critically examines public school parents' knowledge of and interest in alternative schooling options.

Drawing from a telephone survey of 1,000 public school parents in the ten largest school districts in Massachusetts, this paper critically examines public school parents' knowledge of and interest in alternative schooling options. From the analysis, three basic findings emerge: First, while parents claim to be familiar with NCLB, the vast majority of those who in fact qualify for NCLB's choice provisions do not know that their child's school is on the state's list of underperforming schools. Second, parents with children in underperforming schools are especially interested in pursuing alternative schooling options; this interest, however, does not derive from pointed dissatisfaction with their current schools, and it is regularly directed toward options that NCLB does not afford—specifically, private schools. And third, in matters involving education, the personal sphere retains strong links to the political: parents who express interest in an alternative schooling option for their child are especially likely to endorse policy initiatives like school vouchers.

To raise awareness of NCLB's accountability system and increase the number of students who reap its educational benefits, three policy changes are recommended:

If school choice is to catch fire, parents must be granted a wider array of schooling options for their children than currently afforded.

- First, state and federal governments should not rely on districts to disseminate information about which schools have made AYP and which students therefore qualify for transfers and supplemental services.
- Second, when disseminating information about NCLB, special accommodations must be made on behalf of non-English-speaking families. The low levels of knowledge about NCLB schooling options revealed among parents of children attending underperforming schools was matched only by foreign-born and parents lacking proficiency in English.
- Finally, and perhaps most controversially, parents with children at underperforming public schools should be allowed to select any other public school in their district, not just those public schools that made AYP. If choice is to catch fire, as many NCLB advocates hope, parents must be granted a wider array of schooling options for their children than the law currently affords.

Parents, Choice, and Some Foundations for Education Reform in Massachusetts

By **William G. Howell**, Harvard University

INTRODUCTION

Parents are the linchpins in any school choice initiative, be it vouchers, intra- or inter-district public school choice, or a voluntary desegregation plan. What parents know about and want for their child's education critically defines the level of interest in school choice and hence sets in motion (or not) all of the possibilities for competitive pressures and systemic change that reform-minded advocates espouse. If parents are basically satisfied with their child's teacher and school, if they have insufficient information about alternative schooling options, or if they express little desire to disrupt their child's current education, then choice initiatives will not get off the ground.

The choice provisions of the recently enacted No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) are no exception. Under NCLB, states must develop academic proficiency standards and then determine whether public schools are making "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) toward achieving them. Students attending schools that fail to make AYP for two consecutive years have the option of switching to a public school within the district that has achieved AYP. Students attending schools that fail to make AYP for three consecutive years can use their Title I funding for supplemental tutoring services. Thereafter, the state may eventually restructure and/or reconstitute an entire school.

In 2002-2003, just 0.3 percent of the eligible population have seized the opportunity under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to switch to a higher-performing public school.

During the 2002-2003 school year, 983,313 students were enrolled in Massachusetts public schools, of whom 95,458 qualified for NCLB's public school choice provisions. In that year, just 298 students, or 0.3 percent of the eligible population, seized the opportunity to switch to a higher-performing public school. And in this regard, Massachusetts does not appear exceptional. In 46 urban school districts that are members of the Council of the Great City Schools, 1,162,695 students qualified for NCLB's choice provisions during the 2003-2004 school year; only 44,372 students (or 3.8 percent of the eligible population) requested a transfer, and only 17,878 students (or 1.5 percent of the eligible population) actually received one. Though participation rates were up from the 2002-2003 school year, the school choice offered under NCLB still does not appear to be meeting its promise.[1]

Endnotes begin on page 25.

In part, low take-up rates are the intended result of the obstructionist behaviors of state and local bureaucrats, superintendents, and school board members, each of whom has a vested interest in minimizing NCLB's impact on a district by keeping children in their current public schools.[2] Transportation issues and space limitations, meanwhile, prevent still other students from switching public schools.[3] But even if policymakers are able to rework the accountability system so that political actors throughout our system of separated and federated powers freely and enthusiastically promote the law's choice and supplemental services provisions, and even if all logistical problems are solved, widespread enrollment changes are hardly a foregone conclusion. As with all choice initiatives, NCLB does not mandate change—it merely presents some public school parents with new education options. Whether these parents will take advantage of these options and whether they can adequately assess the best interests and needs of their children when doing so remain open questions.

In part, low take-up rates are the intended result of obstructionist behaviors of state and local bureaucrats, superintendents, and school board members, each of whom has a vested interest in keeping children in their current public schools.

Drawing from a telephone survey of 1,000 public school parents in the state of Massachusetts, this paper critically examines public school parents' knowledge of and interest in alternative schooling options. Throughout, special efforts are made to explain why so few students are transferring from one public school to another under NCLB, and what might be done about it. From the analysis, three basic findings emerge: First, while parents claim to be familiar with NCLB, the vast majority of those who in fact qualify for NCLB's choice provisions do not know that their child's school is on the state's list of underperforming schools. Second, parents with children in underperforming schools are especially interested in pursuing alternative schooling options; this interest, however, does not derive from pointed dissatisfaction with their current schools, and it is regularly directed toward options that NCLB does not afford—specifically, private schools. And third, in matters involving education, the personal sphere retains strong links to the political: parents who express interest in an alternative schooling option for their child are especially likely to endorse policy initiatives like school vouchers.

THE SURVEY

During the summer of 2003, 1,000 public school parents in Massachusetts' ten largest school districts were surveyed over the telephone via random digit dial (RDD).[4] One-quarter of the stratified sample consisted of parents living in Boston, another quarter of parents in Springfield, and another in Worcester. The final quarter was drawn from parents in Brockton, Lynn, Lowell, New Bedford, Lawrence, Fall River, and Newton.[5] The reasons for focusing on these large, urban districts are straightforward: NCLB provides for choice options within, but not across, school districts. For choice options to exist, there must be multiple schools at each level within the district from which parents can choose. The vast majority of Massachusetts' school districts are rural or suburban and have just a handful of elementary schools, and just one or two middle and high schools. Urban districts have greater numbers of students and corresponding numbers of schools at each level. The survey focuses on large, urban districts simply because it is there that NCLB stands the greatest chance of effecting change.

Surveys were conducted in either English or Spanish and generally required 15 to 20 minutes to complete. To qualify, households had to have at least one child in a public school, and questions were directed only to a parent or guardian of this child.[6]

In 72 percent of the cases, the respondent was the child's mother, in 22 percent the father, and in 3 percent a grandparent; the rest were other relatives. (Hereafter, respondents will be referred to simply as parents.) When families had more than one child, respondents were asked about the youngest child attending a public school.[7] Thus, elementary school children were the subject of a disproportionate share of the interviews.[8] Before abandoning a telephone number, it was called a total of 15 times, usually spread out over several weeks. The adjusted response rate was 31 percent, which is roughly on par with most telephone surveys using RDD.[9] To the extent that this survey over-sampled socio-economically advantaged families, it likely overstates the level of knowledge that parents have about NCLB; if such families were more successful at placing their child in a preferred public school, the survey underestimates the level of interest in NCLB's choice provisions.[10]

Some additional caveats are in order at the outset. This paper takes a distinctly behavioral orientation. The survey does not provide much basis on which to levy blame—either on parents, teachers, or district administrators—for perceived lapses in knowledge, much less for failings in school performance. The survey's strengths lie more in specifying what parents know and less in why they know it. Moreover, this paper and the survey on which it is based do not intend to scrutinize NCLB's language or design. It takes as given state determinations of school performance and remedies for failure, so as to provide an early assessment of 1) parental knowledge of and interest in new education opportunities, and 2) the challenges faced by advocates of choice and accountability who aim to boost parents' control over and involvement in their children's education.

Finally, a note about the generalizability of the findings that follow. By design, the survey identifies what parents know about and want for their child's education *within a given context and at a given time*. NCLB was not the first piece of legislation to expand the education options presented to Massachusetts parents. Thousands of children statewide attend magnet and charter schools and participate in intra- and inter-district choice initiatives and voluntary desegregation plans. And since 1993, a state accountability system has been in place that includes many of NCLB's essential features: annual student testing, school evaluations, and sanctions and rewards for performance.[11] If the history of education reform in Massachusetts implies that parents are especially informed about NCLB, the Act's relative youth suggests just the opposite. At the time this survey was administered, NCLB had been in operation for just two years; presumably, increasing numbers of parents will, over time, learn about the law and its provisions. Consequently, the findings presented herein are best understood as a snapshot of Massachusetts parents' knowledge two years after NCLB's enactment; any lessons drawn from it may apply only imperfectly to other states and times.

As with all choice initiatives, NCLB does not mandate change—it merely presents some public school parents with new education options. Whether parents will take advantage of these options and whether they can adequately assess the best interests and needs of their children when doing so remain open questions.

KNOWLEDGE

If parents are to exploit new schooling opportunities for their children, they must know about both the existence and the eligibility requirements of relevant programs. Should families remain unaware of state and federal programs or lack the most basic information required to determine whether their children, in fact, qualify for them, then participation rates assuredly will stagnate. This section assesses, in turn, each dimension of knowledge and its implications for NCLB.

Knowledge of NCLB's Existence

When asked, Massachusetts parents claim to know a fair amount about NCLB. Consider the findings presented in the first column of table 1. Among those surveyed, 70 percent profess to have heard of the Act; 52 percent to know about the option of switching from an underperforming school to one that made AYP; and 44 percent to have heard about the availability of supplemental services.[12] As conventional wisdom suggests that average citizens pay little attention to politics and lack basic information about the contents of public policy, these figures reflect well on parents.[13]

Table 1: Parental Knowledge of NCLB

	All parents	Parents with child attending...	
		an underperforming school	a performing school
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Heard of Act			
Yes	69.6%	66.0%	70.8%
No	30.4	34.0	29.2
Total	100.0% [935]	100.0% [232]	100.0% [703]
Heard of Act's choice provisions			
Yes	52.2%	56.8%	50.7%
No	47.8	43.2	49.4
Total	100.0% [935]	100.0% [232]	100.0% [703]
Heard of Act's supplemental services			
Yes	44.1%	52.4%	43.0%
No	55.9	57.6	57.1
Total	100.0% [935]	100.0% [232]	100.0% [703]

Underperforming schools failed to make AYP for one or more years; performing schools, meanwhile, made AYP every year. Number of observations in brackets.

It is less important, though, that all parents know about NCLB than that the right parents—namely, those whose children are attending underperforming schools and hence qualify for new schooling opportunities—know about the Act and its various provisions. The second and third columns of table 1 compare the levels of knowledge registered by parents whose children qualify for choice (because they attend an underperforming public school) and those whose children do not (because they attend performing schools). For the most part, there is continued reason for optimism. While parents of eligible children are slightly less likely to claim to have heard of NCLB, they are 6 and 9 percentage points more likely to know about the Act's choice and supplemental service provisions, respectively.[14]

Assuredly, children enrolled in underperforming public schools, on average, come from different kinds of families and have different educational skills and needs than those who attend performing public schools. In this survey population, parents of children in underperforming schools are less likely to be white, to have been born in the United States, or to own a home, just as they are less educated, have lower incomes, and are less involved in their child's education than parents of children in performing schools. To the extent that these characteristics independently influence knowledge about NCLB and covary with school attendance patterns, the differences observed in table 1 may derive less from the ways in which information is disseminated to families within school districts than from the kinds of families attending underperforming schools. Table 2, therefore, presents results from a series of weighted logistic regressions that predict the probability that parents claim to know about the existence of NCLB (columns 1a and 1b), the Act's public school choice provisions (2a and 2b), and the availability of supplemental services (3a and 3b).[15] Each model controls for numerous family and child background characteristics; in addition, models intermittently include district fixed effects.[16] Descriptive statistics of all variables are included in table A-1 in the Appendix (page 24).

Table 2: Parental Knowledge of NCLB, Multivariate Analyses

	Heard of Act				Heard of Act's choice options				Heard of Act's supplemental services			
	(1a)		(1b)		(2a)		(2b)		(3a)		(3b)	
Attends underperforming school	0.41	(0.26)	0.39	(0.26)	0.73***	(0.23)	0.66***	(0.24)	0.60***	(0.23)	0.46**	(0.23)
Parent characteristics												
African American	0.08	(0.34)	-0.14	(0.36)	0.02	(0.30)	-0.04	(0.32)	-0.28	(0.33)	0.00	(0.34)
Hispanic	-0.52	(0.48)	-0.52	(0.52)	0.18	(0.44)	0.15	(0.46)	-0.68	(0.43)	-0.65	(0.46)
Born in United States	1.16***	(0.29)	1.19***	(0.30)	0.70**	(0.28)	0.74***	(0.28)	0.35	(0.28)	0.27	(0.29)
Education	1.89***	(0.54)	1.76***	(0.56)	1.50***	(0.50)	1.57***	(0.52)	0.69	(0.51)	1.01*	(0.53)
Work full time	-0.08	(0.23)	-0.04	(0.23)	0.22	(0.21)	0.21	(0.20)	0.26	(0.21)	0.27	(0.21)
Own home	0.59**	(0.28)	0.51*	(0.30)	0.35	(0.26)	0.31	(0.27)	-0.00	(0.28)	-0.01	(0.29)
Married	0.58**	(0.26)	0.70***	(0.27)	0.15	(0.25)	0.19	(0.25)	-0.03	(0.26)	-0.13	(0.26)
Female	-0.20	(0.25)	-0.10	(0.26)	-0.17	(0.22)	-0.13	(0.22)	0.06	(0.23)	0.04	(0.23)
Freq. attend religious services	0.38	(0.34)	0.30	(0.38)	0.54	(0.35)	0.61*	(0.33)	0.70**	(0.34)	0.65**	(0.33)
Catholic	-0.30	(0.29)	-0.14	(0.31)	-0.13	(0.27)	-0.07	(0.27)	-0.20	(0.28)	-0.21	(0.27)
Protestant	0.13	(0.34)	0.19	(0.36)	0.20	(0.29)	-0.20	(0.29)	-0.04	(0.30)	0.09	(0.30)
Child characteristics												
Special needs	0.13	(0.21)	0.16	(0.21)	0.05	(0.19)	0.02	(0.20)	0.01	(0.19)	0.00	(0.19)
Elementary school	0.15	(0.23)	0.21	(0.24)	-0.11	(0.21)	-0.10	(0.21)	-0.30	(0.21)	-0.32	(0.21)
Boy	0.44**	(0.21)	0.49**	(0.22)	0.16	(0.19)	0.18	(0.19)	-0.02	(0.19)	-0.03	(0.19)
Parental involvement												
Volunteer at school	0.53**	(0.22)	0.58***	(0.22)	0.38*	(0.21)	0.33*	(0.20)	0.40*	(0.21)	0.49**	(0.21)
PTA member	0.63**	(0.26)	0.65**	(0.27)	0.64***	(0.22)	0.66***	(0.22)	0.57***	(0.21)	0.47**	(0.22)
Work public school district	0.97***	(0.28)	0.94***	(0.31)	0.86***	(0.23)	0.87***	(0.25)	0.94***	(0.23)	0.89***	(0.23)
Constant	-2.74***	(0.60)	-2.77***	(0.79)	-2.54***	(0.55)	-2.60***	(0.64)	-1.79***	(0.53)	-1.26*	(0.66)
Pseudo-R^2	.19		.21		.12		.13		.09		.12	
Log likelihood	-391.40		-376.44		-474.58		-468.33		-488.81		-470.31	
Number of observations	781		781		781		781		781		781	
District fixed effects included	No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes	

Weighted logit models estimated with robust standard errors reported in parentheses. * p<.10, two tailed test; ** p<.05; *** p<.01. The dependent variable is coded 1 if respondent claimed to have heard of NCLB (models 1a and 1b), opportunities under the Act to transfer out of underperforming public schools (2a and 2b), or the Act's supplemental services (3a and 3b), and 0 otherwise. All explanatory variables rescaled 0-1. Given high number of missing values, income not included in models; most estimates, however, appear unchanged when it is added.

Even after controlling for a wide range of background characteristics, we still find ample evidence that parents with children in underperforming schools know more about NCLB and its various choice provisions than do parents with children in performing schools. In all models, the estimated coefficients are positive; and in four of the six models, the point estimates are statistically significant. Holding all other variables at their means, the fixed-effects models predict that parents of children in underperforming schools are 7 percentage points more likely to have heard of NCLB, 16 points more likely to know of the Act's public school choice options, and 8 points more likely to know of the availability of supplemental service provisions.

For the most part, the estimated coefficients associated with background controls make intuitive sense. Born in the United States, parent's education, home ownership, and married are almost always positively associated with parental knowledge of NCLB, and in many instances, the impacts are statistically significant. Among parental background characteristics, the two with the most predictive power are place of birth and parent's education.[17] Fixing all other variables at their means, the models predict that

native-born parents are between 4 and 26 percentage points more likely to know about different aspects of NCLB than are foreign-born parents. And moving from one standard deviation below the mean of parent's education to one standard deviation above translates into between an 11 and a 15 percentage point increase in the probability that a parent will indicate awareness of different aspects of NCLB.

Churches and synagogues can be important conduits for information about community affairs. At Saturday and Sunday services, soup kitchens, and clothing drives, congregants have ample opportunities to discuss goings-on in their communities, and to exchange insights about education programs and opportunities. Numerous scholars, what is more, have observed high levels of social capital and connectedness within religious communities.[18] Elsewhere, in the context of a targeted, urban voucher program, I observed that parents who attend religious services are more likely to have the necessary knowledge, interest, and wherewithal to apply for vouchers, to find access to a private school, and to maintain their child's enrollment there over time.[19] Here, too, we find evidence that parents who regularly attend religious services are more likely to profess awareness of NCLB. Holding all other variables at their means, a shift of one standard deviation below the mean of religious attendance to one standard deviation above corresponds with between a 3 and a 9 percentage point increase in the probability that a parent knows about some aspect of NCLB.[20]

Parents with children in underperforming schools know more about NCLB and its various choice provisions than do parents with children in performing schools.

One might expect parents with special-needs children to pay especially high amounts of attention to their child's education, and hence to the quality of their schools. While average children may easily adapt to a wide variety of educational settings, students at the high and low ends of the distribution may suffer both personally and academically when they lack adequate accommodations, inducing parents to monitor carefully the information available about their child's school. With regard to NCLB, however, the evidence on this score is mixed. Though all of the coefficients are positive, none even approach standard thresholds of statistical significance.[21]

Consistently, the largest impacts on knowledge are associated with measures of parental involvement. Parents who volunteer in their child's school, who are members of a Parent Teacher Association, or who themselves work in the public school system (or have a family member who does) are much more likely to claim to have heard of NCLB, as well as its choice and supplemental service provisions. Depending on the model estimated, involvement in one of the three associations corresponds with between a 9 and a 22 percentage point increase in the probability that parents know about NCLB. Those, it seems, who work and volunteer in public schools are most aware of state and federal policies designed to hold the schools accountable and expand education options for qualifying students.[22]

Knowledge of Eligibility under NCLB

Parents overall, as well as the subset of parents with children in underperforming schools, reveal markedly high levels of awareness of NCLB. But knowledge that educational opportunities exist does not automatically translate into high participation rates. Additionally, parents must know whether their child qualifies for the law's benefits. And here, information networks begin to break down.

The federal government's accountability system relies on assessing the public schools' annual yearly progress (AYP) toward state-mandated proficiency standards. From these determinations, penalties are directed to schools and districts, while new educational opportunities avail themselves to parents and students. To navigate the education landscape, and to seize upon new schooling opportunities, it is vital that parents know the status of their child's school. Unless they know whether their child qualifies for the Act's choice and supplemental service provisions, parents' general awareness of NCLB does them little good.

Parents with children in underperforming schools generally do not know that their school is on the list of underperforming public schools, and hence lack the most basic information required to pursue the benefits for which their children are eligible.

Overall, 25 percent of the Massachusetts parents surveyed had children who attended underperforming schools. But when asked whether their child's school was on the list of underperforming schools, only 12 percent of parents responded affirmatively. Something, plainly, is amiss.[23]

Using self-reports to assess knowledge about policy matters is always a tricky business. Indeed, in many ways the history of survey research constitutes a long cautionary tale about the problems of taking people at their word.[24] For a wide variety of reasons, what people say in the context of telephone surveys does not reliably match what they believe, know, or do. In this instance, parents have ample incentives to feign knowledge of matters about which they have very little information and to overestimate their ability to place their child in a successful public school—both of which effectively distort assessments of parental awareness of NCLB and the characteristics of children that the Act intends to reach.

Fortunately, we do not need to rely exclusively on what parents tell us. Because the survey asked for the name of the school that each child attended, we can use Department of Education administrative records to verify their responses. Doing so, a more sobering view of parental awareness begins to emerge. For starters, only 49 percent of surveyed parents in Massachusetts could correctly identify whether their child's school made AYP—which assuredly represents an upper bound on knowledge, as an unknown percentage of parents guessed correctly. Forty percent of parents admitted not knowing whether their child's school made AYP, while the remaining 11 percent incorrectly identified the status of the school.[25]

As the results in table 3 demonstrate, parents have markedly different levels of knowledge about the status of their children's schools. Unfortunately, the observed disparities point in a direction exactly opposite of what one would hope. While parents with children who attend performing public schools generally know that their child's school is not on the list of underperforming public schools, parents with children in underperforming schools generally do not know that their school is and hence lack the most basic information required to

Table 3: Parental Knowledge of Child's School

	All parents		Parents with child attending... an underperforming school		a performing school	
	(1)		(2)		(3)	
Status of child's school under NCLB						
Identify correctly	48.8%		29.3%		57.3%	
Identify incorrectly	11.3		28.8		5.8	
"Don't know"	39.9		42.0		36.9	
Total	100.0%	[964]	100.0%	[232]	100.0%	[703]
Principal's name at child's school						
Identify correctly	49.5%		49.5%		58.1%	
Identify incorrectly	12.1		12.1		16.3	
"Don't know"	38.4		38.4		25.6	
Total	100.0%	[935]	100.0%	[232]	100.0%	[703]
Size of child's school						
Identify correctly	40.0%		22.7%		46.0%	
Identify incorrectly	38.7		50.5		34.6	
"Don't know"	21.3		26.8		19.5	
Total	100.0%	[927]	100.0%	[232]	100.0%	[695]

Number of observations in brackets.

pursue the NCLB benefits for which their children are eligible. Fully 57 percent of parents with a child attending a performing public school know the school's status, compared to just 29 percent of families with a child in an underperforming school—even though the state government 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.

Part of the trouble here, I suspect, is that when parents lack facts to the contrary, they assume that their child's school meets the grade. After all, who wants to admit, especially to a stranger on the telephone, that they send their child to a poor public school? This predisposition would explain the kind of imbalances observed in table 3: when guessing, parents in performing public schools are more likely to answer correctly than parents with students in underperforming public schools. It would be a mistake, however, to dismiss this empirical phenomenon as an artifact of survey research. Indeed, immediate policy consequences are apparent. In addition to overcoming districts' reluctance to promote the Act's choice and supplemental service provisions, NCLB advocates also must find ways to break through parents' independent evaluations of their children's schools. More to the point, spreading the word about NCLB's choice and supplemental services provisions entails convincing many parents that their child's public school is not as good—at least, according to state standards—as they think it is.

Either because underperforming schools are doing a poor job of communicating with parents or because parents are insufficiently involved in their child's education (or both), parents of children in underperforming schools know less about a wide variety of aspects of their child's education than parents of children at schools that made adequate yearly progress.

Cognitive dissonance, however, does not constitute the only barrier to knowledge, for parents at performing and underperforming school also retain different levels of information about other aspects of their children's schools. Again, using administrative records to verify parental responses, I was able to identify which parents knew the name of their child's school principal and the size of the school. The results break down along much the same lines as those observed above. Whereas 58 percent of parents at public schools that made AYP were able to correctly name their child's principal, only 49 percent of parents with children at underperforming schools could do so. Similarly, when asked about the size of their child's school, 46 percent of parents of children at performing schools picked the right population range, compared to 23 percent of parents of children in underperforming schools. Either because underperforming schools are doing a poor job of communicating with parents or because parents are insufficiently involved in their child's education (or both), parents of children in underperforming schools know less about a wide variety of aspects of their child's education than parents of children at schools that made AYP.

All of these findings hold up in multivariate models. Table 4 presents the results from a series of weighted logistic regressions that predict the probability that parents correctly identify the status of their child's school (columns 1a and 1b), the name of the school's principal (2a and 2b), and the size of the school (3a and 3b). Across the board, parents whose children attend underperforming school know less than parents whose children attend performing public schools. Holding all other variables at their means, the models predict that parents with children in underperforming schools are 25 percentage points less likely to identify the status of their child's school, 8 percentage points less likely to know the name of the principal, and 22 percentage points less likely to know the school's size than are parents with children in performing schools.

Table 4: Parental Knowledge of Child's School, Multivariate Analyses

	Correctly identify school status				Correctly identify principal's name				Correctly identify school size			
	(1a)		(1b)		(2a)		(2b)		(3a)		(3b)	
Attends underperforming school	-1.06***	(0.24)	-1.01***	(0.24)	-0.56**	(0.23)	-0.27	(0.24)	-1.07***	(0.25)	-1.01***	(0.27)
Parent characteristics												
African American	0.20	(0.33)	0.06	(0.34)	-0.20	(0.30)	-0.26	(0.32)	-1.22***	(0.36)	-1.17***	(0.37)
Hispanic	-1.19*	(0.64)	-1.30**	(0.67)	-0.07	(0.38)	-0.12	(0.44)	-0.45	(0.47)	-0.50	(0.47)
Born in United States	0.42	(0.30)	0.39	(0.30)	0.36	(0.27)	0.55*	(0.31)	0.24	(0.30)	0.21	(0.31)
Education	1.29***	(0.50)	1.05**	(0.51)	1.20**	(0.49)	1.22**	(0.53)	1.02**	(0.50)	0.83	(0.51)
Work full time	0.35*	(0.21)	0.38*	(0.21)	-0.24	(0.21)	-0.30	(0.21)	-0.52***	(0.20)	-0.55***	(0.21)
Own home	0.32	(0.26)	0.30	(0.26)	0.18	(0.26)	0.21	(0.26)	0.16	(0.25)	0.20	(0.25)
Married	-0.02	(0.24)	-0.01	(0.25)	0.16	(0.25)	0.20	(0.23)	-0.14	(0.26)	-0.17	(0.26)
Female	0.13	(0.23)	0.15	(0.24)	0.33	(0.23)	0.38	(0.24)	-0.05	(0.23)	-0.06	(0.22)
Freq. attend religious services	0.05	(0.36)	-0.03	(0.36)	0.02	(0.32)	0.35	(0.33)	-0.24	(0.35)	-0.28	(0.35)
Catholic	0.19	(0.29)	0.39	(0.31)	-0.11	(0.25)	-0.26	(0.29)	0.13	(0.28)	0.17	(0.30)
Protestant	-0.05	(0.34)	0.06	(0.35)	-0.07	(0.28)	-0.29	(0.31)	0.23	(0.32)	0.27	(0.32)
Child characteristics												
Special needs	0.07	(0.20)	0.09	(0.20)	-0.15	(0.20)	-0.12	(0.19)	-0.08	(0.19)	-0.02	(0.19)
Elementary school	0.02	(0.20)	0.07	(0.21)	0.88***	(0.21)	0.98***	(0.21)	-0.04	(0.21)	-0.04	(0.21)
Boy	0.22	(0.20)	0.25	(0.20)	-0.08	(0.19)	-0.13	(0.19)	0.29	(0.19)	0.29	(0.19)
Parental involvement												
Volunteer at school	0.37*	(0.21)	0.41*	(0.21)	0.66***	(0.20)	0.57***	(0.21)	0.38*	(0.21)	0.45**	(0.21)
PTA member	0.62***	(0.22)	0.58***	(0.22)	0.33	(0.23)	0.56**	(0.23)	0.25	(0.22)	0.20	(0.23)
Work public school district	0.52**	(0.27)	0.55**	(0.26)	-0.18	(0.24)	-0.06	(0.23)	0.18	(0.24)	0.22	(0.24)
Constant	-2.00***	(0.55)	-1.72*	(1.00)	-1.49***	(0.56)	-1.66**	(0.66)	-0.66	(0.53)	0.12	(0.63)
Pseudo-R^2	.12		.14		.10		.16		.11		.13	
Log likelihood	-474.13		-467.62		-479.66		-447.06		-467.87		-458.04	
Number of observations	781		781		781		781		775		775	
District fixed effects included	No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes	

Weighted logit models estimated with robust standard errors reported in parentheses. * p<.10, two tailed test; ** p<.05; *** p<.01. The dependent variable is coded 1 if respondent correctly identified status of school (models 1a and 1b), the principal's name (2a and 2b), or the school size (3a and 3b), and 0 otherwise. All explanatory variables rescaled 0-1. Given high number of missing values, income not included in models; most estimates, however, appear unchanged when it is added.

The background controls, again, correlate with knowledge in expected ways. The models predict that Hispanics are 30 percentage points less likely than whites to know the status of their child's school, and African-Americans are 24 percentage points less likely than whites to identify the size of their child's school. Though effects are not always significant, born in the United States and home ownership correlate positively with parents' knowledge about their child's school. Curiously, parents who work full time are slightly more likely to know the status of their child's school, though they are less likely to know its size. The estimated impacts associated with a parent's education, meanwhile, are consistently large and significant. Moving from one standard deviation below the mean of a parent's education to one standard deviation above, while holding all other variables at their means, translates into between a 12 and a 14 percentage point increase in the probability that a parent correctly identifies characteristics of their child's school.

Unlike in the models that predicted policy awareness, religion and religiosity do not systematically enhance parents' knowledge about their child's school's status under NCLB. Catholics, Protestants, and individuals who regularly attend religious services are generally no more likely to correctly identify characteristics of their child's school than are individuals who claim not to have any religious affiliation or who refused to answer the question.

The only child characteristic to register significant effects is grade level. Parents of children in elementary schools are 23 percentage points more likely to know the name of the principal than are parents with children in middle or high school. Elementary school parents, however, are no more likely to identify the status of their child's school or its size.

Just as they expressed higher levels of knowledge of NCLB, parents with direct access to the public school system also appear especially informed about school performance. The models predict that parents who volunteer at their child's school, who are members of a PTA, or who work in public school districts are 10 to 14 percentage points more likely to know whether their child's school is underperforming than other parents. Comparable effects are observed in models that predict parental knowledge of their child's principal and school size.

For the most part, the key variables identified from simple comparisons of proportions continue to affect levels of parental knowledge. Parents of children in underperforming schools know less about their child's school; parents who have more education, who volunteer at school, are members of a PTA, or who work for a district, tend to know more. Religion and special-needs children continue to register null effects, while the estimated impacts of ethnicity, marriage, employment status, and native-born attenuate somewhat. Several variables, meanwhile, appear item-specific. For instance, parents are significantly more likely to know the name of an elementary school principal than a middle or high school principal, even though grade level has no bearing on the probability that parents know the status of their child's school or its size. And while parents who work full time are more likely to know whether their child's school is underperforming, they are less likely to know its size.

Since only a fraction of parents know that their children qualify for the new schooling opportunities, it is little wonder that so few parents have taken advantage of them.

Who, then, is most likely to know about the status of their child's school? Parents with children in performing schools (who do not qualify for NCLB's choice and supplemental service provisions); non-Hispanics, the educated, and the well-off (who presumably had the means to reside in districts with better schools); and families with strong personal and professional ties to the public schools (who are already involved in their child's educational life). Such findings underscore a sad irony: those who thrive in the existing system have the information required to realize that NCLB will not help them any further, while those who struggle lack the information required to explore new schooling options that might improve their lot.

Conclusions

How do these findings help explain the low participation rates in NCLB's choice provisions? Two lessons are apparent. First, the survey data suggest that parents' general awareness of the Act is not the problem. Overall, parents appear well informed about NCLB's existence. Parents whose children attend underperforming schools, and hence qualify for public school choice and supplemental services, consistently register higher levels of awareness than parents whose children attend performing schools. To identify a link between parental knowledge and low participation rates, one must press further and consider the program's eligibility criteria. While parents with children in underperforming schools are more likely to know about NCLB, they are considerably less likely to know that they in fact attend a school that failed to make AYP and therefore qualify for public school choice and supplemental services. Since only a fraction of parents know that their children qualify for the new schooling opportunities, it is little wonder that so few parents have taken advantage of them.

INTEREST

If NCLB's choice provisions are to catch on, lawmakers must ensure that parents have more than just a base level of knowledge about which schools made AYP and which did not. Lawmakers must offer alternative schooling options that actually appeal to parents, and sufficiently so that parents are willing to disrupt their child's current education in order to obtain them. In three steps, the next section assesses the demand side of the equation: first, by measuring parental satisfaction with their child's current school, then by examining parental interest in alternative schooling options, and finally by considering the qualities of public schools that matter most to parents. Throughout, the intended beneficiaries of choice under NCLB (namely, parents with children in underperforming public schools) are juxtaposed against those whom the Act excludes (parents with children in performing public schools).

Parents' Satisfaction with Their Children's Current Schools

The chances that parents will explore new education options surely depend on how satisfied they are with their child's current school. Parents who are basically pleased with their child's school, no matter how the federal accountability system rates it, are not likely to request transfers. Choice provisions ought to appeal most to those parents who anxiously await opportunities to abandon schools that they themselves perceive as failing.

If interest in alternative education options only thrives in areas of widespread discontent, Massachusetts districts need not worry about children fleeing their public schools in droves. In the surveys, parents were asked to grade their child's school on an A to F scale. Their responses, presented in table 5, confirm those found in numerous other studies—namely, parents are basically satisfied with their children's public schools.[26] In this survey, fully 82 percent of parents gave their child's public school either an A or a B, while just 5 percent gave the school a D or an F. Whatever may be objectively wrong with Massachusetts public schools, parents give them strong votes of confidence.

Table 5: Parental Satisfaction

	All parents	Parents with child attending . . .	
		an underperforming school	a performing school
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Grade give school child attends			
A	37.2%	28.7%	41.5%
B	44.4	44.6	44.0
C	13.2	16.8	10.6
D	3.4	6.6	2.5
F	1.8	3.3	1.3
Total	100.0% [991]	100.0% [229]	100.0% [698]
Grade give schools in community			
A	15.8%	11.5%	16.9%
B	45.4	42.8	47.6
C	25.6	31.7	22.9
D	7.9	6.7	8.9
F	5.3	7.4	4.0
Total	100.0% [932]	100.0% [216]	100.0% [657]

Number of observations in brackets.

When focusing on NCLB's target population, the story changes somewhat. Compare the results in columns 2 and 3. Though most parents with children in underperforming schools did not know their school's status under NCLB's accountability system, they nonetheless expressed less satisfaction with the quality of their child's education. Parents with children in underperforming schools were 13 percentage points less likely to give their child's school an A and almost three times as likely to give the school a D or an F as were parents with children in performing schools.

Parents express relatively high levels of satisfaction with their child's school, but the same cannot be said for the schools in the district as a whole. While 37 percent of parents gave their child's school an A, only 16 percent gave the schools in their community the

highest mark. And though just 5 percent of parents gave their child's school a D or an F, 13 percent gave their community's schools the lowest of grades. For the most part, differences between parents attending underperforming and performing public schools are modest. Though 17 percent of parents with children at schools that made AYP gave their community's schools an A, only 12 percent with children at underperforming schools did so. At the bottom end of the grading spectrum, meanwhile, the responses of parents with children in performing and underperforming schools are indistinguishable.[27]

Table 6: Parental Satisfaction, Multivariate Analyses

	Give child's current public school an A				Give public schools in community an A			
	(1a)		(1b)		(2a)		(2b)	
Attends underperforming school	-0.50**	(0.24)	-0.55**	(0.25)	-0.50*	(0.30)	-0.42	(0.32)
Parent characteristics								
African American	0.17	(0.31)	0.09	(0.33)	-0.00	(0.36)	-0.01	(0.35)
Hispanic	-0.29	(0.45)	-0.40	(0.46)	-0.37	(0.56)	-0.38	(0.61)
Born in United States	-0.24	(0.29)	-0.23	(0.29)	-0.20	(0.36)	-0.22	(0.34)
Education	0.52	(0.48)	0.23	(0.48)	0.94	(0.65)	0.58	(0.67)
Work full time	-0.41**	(0.20)	-0.43**	(0.20)	-0.74***	(0.25)	-0.76***	(0.26)
Own home	0.31	(0.25)	0.39	(0.26)	-0.36	(0.34)	-0.35	(0.33)
Married	-0.32	(0.25)	-0.25	(0.26)	0.70**	(0.34)	0.75**	(0.35)
Female	-0.33	(0.22)	-0.32	(0.23)	0.11	(0.30)	0.17	(0.30)
Freq. attend religious services	0.44	(0.35)	0.36	(0.33)	-0.93**	(0.39)	-1.00***	(0.38)
Catholic	-0.13	(0.26)	-0.09	(0.27)	0.29	(0.32)	0.32	(0.33)
Protestant	0.44	(0.31)	0.40	(0.31)	0.56*	(0.32)	0.54	(0.33)
Child characteristics								
Special needs	-0.01	(0.19)	0.00	(0.19)	-0.11	(0.23)	-0.05	(0.25)
Elementary school	0.38*	(0.21)	0.40*	(0.21)	0.71**	(0.28)	0.75**	(0.29)
Boy	-0.30	(0.19)	-0.30	(0.19)	0.02	(0.24)	0.08	(0.24)
Parental involvement								
Volunteer at school	0.04	(0.20)	0.07	(0.21)	0.06	(0.26)	0.12	(0.26)
PTA member	0.35*	(0.21)	0.23	(0.21)	0.17	(0.27)	0.17	(0.28)
Work public school district	0.11	(0.23)	0.18	(0.24)	0.00	(0.29)	0.00	(0.28)
Constant	-0.16	(0.52)	0.15	(0.62)	-2.18***	(0.65)	-1.66**	(0.75)
Pseudo-R^2	.04		.07		.07		.10	
Log likelihood	-500.25		-486.94		-306.27		-296.36	
Number of observations	781		781		773		773	
District fixed effects included	No		Yes		No		Yes	

Weighted logit models estimated with robust standard errors reported in parentheses. * p<.10, two tailed test; ** p<.05; *** p<.01. The dependent variable is coded 1 if parent gave either the child's school (models 1a and 1b) or the public schools in the community (models 2a and 2b) an "A" and zero otherwise. All explanatory variables rescaled 0-1. Given high number of missing values, income not included in models; most estimates, however, appear unchanged when it is added.

Table 6 presents the results from multivariate analyses—this time, estimating the probability that a parent gives either their child's own school (columns 1a and 1b) or the community's schools (2a and 2b) an A. Even when controlling for a wide range of background characteristics, parents of children attending underperforming schools are significantly less likely to give their child's school an A than are parents with a child in a school that made AYP. Impacts on parental satisfaction with the community's schools also appear negative, though they are not significant in models that include district fixed effects.[28] Most of the other variables in the models appear unrelated to parental satisfaction with their child's or the community's public schools. Interestingly, though, parents of children in elementary schools give all public schools higher marks, and parents who work full time give lower grades. A few differences between models 1a and 1b and models 2a and 2b are observed. Specifically, while marital status and religion have no discernible bearing on parents' satisfaction with their child's school, married parents are more likely to give the community's schools an A, while people who regularly attend religious services are less likely to do so.

Conclusions

Two lessons are apparent here. First, parents are especially critical of schools that their children do not attend. Just as average citizens express considerably higher levels of satisfaction with their own congressional representative than with Congress as a whole, parents rally behind their children's schools while casting occasional aspersions at institutions their children do not attend.[29] Additionally, these findings provide an early hint that NCLB's target population might refuse the particular schooling options that the Act avails. Parents at schools that failed to make AYP are less satisfied with their own child's school, but they are not overwhelmingly dissatisfied, nor are they especially keen on the schools in the district as a whole. In fact, NCLB's intended beneficiaries think less of their district's public schools than do parents in performing schools—a fact that does not bode especially well for political observers who hoped that the Act, at last, would unleash pent-up demand for new public schooling options within districts.

Parents with children in underperforming schools are more than twice as likely to express interest in switching public schools than parents with children in performing public schools.

Switching Schools

It would be a mistake to conclude that general contentment with the public schools translates into disinterest in alternative education options. While questions about parental satisfaction suggest mild curiosity, more direct questions reveal considerable interest in other traditional public, charter, and private schools. And once again, differences are regularly observed between those parents whose children qualify for NCLB's choice provisions and those whose children do not.

Take a look at table 7. Between 11 and 16 percent of parents claim that they would prefer their child attend a different public school in the same district, a different public school in a different district, or a charter school. And in all three instances, interest is higher among parents with children in schools that failed to make AYP. Though they express less satisfaction with their district's public schools than do parents with children in performing public schools, and though they are less likely to know whether their children qualify for NCLB's choice provisions, parents with children in underperforming schools are more than twice as likely to express interest in switching public schools. One in four parents whose child attends

Table 7: Parental Interest in Alternative Schooling Options

	All parents		Parents with child attending . . . an underperforming school		Parents with child attending . . . a performing school	
	(1)		(2)		(3)	
Percent prefer that child attends [a]						
Different public school in same district	14.5	[995]	23.1	[230]	10.8	[700]
Different public school in different district	15.9	[992]	18.1	[231]	15.5	[696]
Charter school	10.9	[987]	18.3	[227]	7.6	[697]
Private school	39.4	[980]	45.0	[226]	38.1	[690]
Percent able to name a preferred school [b]						
Different public school in same district	11.3	[995]	18.8	[230]	8.8	[700]
Charter school	7.2	[987]	12.0	[227]	5.5	[697]
Private school	26.5	[980]	31.3	[226]	26.3	[690]
Among interested parents, type of school ***most*** *like child to attend* [c]						
Public school in same district	23.4%		18.1%		26.0%	
Public school in different district	5.8		6.9		5.4	
Charter school	8.2		11.9		6.0	
Private school	58.5		61.6		57.0	
Don't know	4.1		1.5		5.6	
Total	100.0%	[539]	100.0%	[146]	100.0%	[358]

Number of observations in brackets.

[a] Parents could express interest in multiple kinds of alternative schools.
[b] Parents who preferred to send their child to a different public school in a different district were not asked to name the school they had in mind.
[c] Parents had to choose one type of school for their child. Only those parents who expressed interest in at least one alternative schooling option were included in sample.

an underperforming public school claims a preference for sending her child to a different public school in the same district, compared to one in ten parents with children in performing public schools. Much the same pattern of findings applies to public schools in different districts and charter schools.

Parents who preferred that their child attend a different school were asked to name an alternative—allowing us to distinguish parents with passing interests from those with stronger commitments to new schooling options. Demand, once again, appears highest among families with children in underperforming schools. Parents with children in underperforming public schools are more than twice as likely to name a preferred public school in their district or a charter school than are parents with children in schools that made AYP.

Parents appear most enthusiastic about the prospects of sending their child to a private school.

The bigger story in table 7, however, concerns private schools. Parents appear most enthusiastic about the prospects of sending their child to a private school. Fully 39 percent of parents generally, and 45 percent of parents in underperforming schools, claim that "if cost were not an obstacle," they would rather send their child to a private school than to the child's current public school. And a surprisingly high percentage of these parents have a particular private school in mind. Roughly one in three parents with children in underperforming schools both prefers that her child attend a private school and is able to name a specific school on the spot, many of which are elite independent schools.[30]

When reflecting on private schooling options, observed differences between parents with children in performing and underperforming schools attenuate somewhat. Whereas parents with children in underperforming schools were twice as likely to prefer an alternative district or charter school, they were only 5 to 7 percentage points more likely to express interest in sending their child to a private school. Attending a public school with low test scores, it seems, does not appear to be an especially important indicator of parental interest in a private education.

Which type of school would parents "most like their child to attend"? Among parents interested in an alternative to their child's current public school, one option stands out: private schools. On the whole, 59 percent of parents hold a private school in highest regard, while 23 percent selected another public school in the same district, 8 percent a charter school, and just 6 percent a public school in another district. Ironically, parents with children in performing schools (who do not qualify for NCLB's choice options) were 8 percentage points more likely to identify another public school in their district (the one option NCLB avails) than were parents with children in underperforming schools (who do qualify for NCLB's choice options). Moreover, parents with children in underperforming schools were slightly more likely than parents with children in performing public schools to prefer that their child attend a public school in another district, a charter school, or a private school (all choice options unavailable under NCLB).

Interest in alternative schooling options has less to do with the status of a child's school per se than with the kinds of families whose children attend the school. Take a look at table 8, which presents results from models that estimate the probability that parents would rather their child attend an alternative public school or private school. After controlling for family background characteristics, attendance at an underperforming public school appears positively, but insignificantly, related to the probability that a parent

Table 8: Parental Interest in Alternative Public and Private Schools, Multivariate Analyses

	Interested in PUBLIC school alternative to current public school								Interested in PRIVATE school alternative to current public school							
	(1a)		(1b)		(1c)		(1d)		(2a)		(2b)		(2c)		(2d)	
Attend underperforming sch.	0.36	(0.24)	0.27	(0.25)	0.26	(0.24)	0.14	(0.25)	0.36	(0.22)	0.30	(0.24)	0.26	(0.23)	0.17	(0.24)
Satisfaction with own school [a]					-1.36***	(0.26)	-1.41***	(0.26)					-1.38***	(0.25)	-1.45***	(0.25)
Relative satisfaction [b]					0.51**	(0.22)	0.70***	(0.24)					0.65***	(0.21)	0.75***	(0.22)
Parent characteristics																
African American	0.11	(0.30)	-0.07	(0.34)	0.21	(0.31)	0.01	(0.35)	-0.01	(0.30)	-0.04	(0.32)	0.05	(0.32)	0.01	(0.34)
Hispanic	0.18	(0.40)	-0.02	(0.41)	0.03	(0.47)	-0.17	(0.47)	0.89**	(0.41)	0.77*	(0.41)	0.84**	(0.39)	0.68*	(0.39)
Born in United States	-0.30	(0.27)	-0.38	(0.27)	-0.45	(0.28)	-0.54*	(0.28)	-0.42	(0.26)	-0.47*	(0.26)	-0.59**	(0.27)	-0.65**	(0.28)
Education	-0.35	(0.47)	-0.21	(0.49)	-0.06	(0.49)	0.01	(0.51)	0.57	(0.46)	0.51	(0.48)	0.92**	(0.47)	0.84*	(0.49)
Work full time	0.03	(0.21)	0.00	(0.23)	-0.14	(0.22)	-0.15	(0.23)	0.38*	(0.20)	0.42**	(0.21)	0.25	(0.21)	0.28	(0.21)
Own home	-0.49*	(0.28)	-0.57*	(0.29)	-0.48*	(0.28)	-0.54*	(0.29)	0.18	(0.27)	0.20	(0.27)	0.23	(0.27)	0.28	(0.26)
Married	0.23	(0.25)	0.42	(0.29)	0.16	(0.25)	0.34	(0.28)	-0.11	(0.24)	-0.07	(0.25)	-0.22	(0.24)	-0.17	(0.25)
Female	0.07	(0.24)	0.09	(0.24)	-0.04	(0.25)	0.00	(0.26)	0.00	(0.21)	0.00	(0.22)	-0.11	(0.22)	-0.11	(0.22)
Freq. attend relig. services	0.22	(0.33)	0.12	(0.36)	0.29	(0.33)	0.22	(0.36)	0.38	(0.33)	0.28	(0.34)	0.47	(0.35)	0.36	(0.35)
Catholic	-0.08	(0.28)	0.08	(0.31)	-0.02	(0.29)	0.13	(0.31)	-0.06	(0.18)	-0.22	(0.28)	-0.27	(0.27)	-0.19	(0.28)
Protestant	0.11	(0.30)	0.22	(0.32)	0.05	(0.30)	0.17	(0.32)	-0.12	(0.20)	-0.26	(0.30)	-0.43	(0.30)	-0.32	(0.30)
Child characteristics																
Special needs	-0.12	(0.20)	-0.16	(0.21)	-0.17	(0.20)	-0.22	(0.21)	0.12	(0.19)	0.16	(0.19)	0.09	(0.19)	0.11	(0.19)
Elementary school	0.56**	(0.23)	0.68**	(0.24)	0.59**	(0.23)	0.72***	(0.25)	0.30	(0.20)	0.29	(0.21)	0.32	(0.21)	0.32	(0.21)
Boy	0.36*	(0.20)	0.39*	(0.21)	0.29	(0.20)	0.32	(0.21)	-0.06	(0.18)	-0.09	(0.19)	-0.14	(0.19)	-0.18	(0.19)
Parental involvement																
Volunteer at school	0.09	(0.22)	0.06	(0.23)	0.13	(0.22)	0.10	(0.24)	-0.12	(0.20)	-0.15	(0.20)	-0.09	(0.20)	-0.13	(0.20)
PTA member	-0.12	(0.24)	-0.15	(0.23)	-0.10	(0.25)	-0.09	(0.24)	0.03	(0.22)	-0.04	(0.22)	0.09	(0.23)	0.00	(0.22)
Work public school district	-0.35	(0.25)	-0.36	(0.24)	-0.36	(0.26)	-0.35	(0.25)	-0.06	(0.23)	-0.06	(0.24)	-0.05	(0.24)	-0.03	(0.25)
Constant	-1.03*	(0.55)	-1.48**	(0.68)	0.12	(0.59)	-0.35	(0.69)	-0.90*	(0.52)	-0.82	(0.60)	0.20	(0.57)	0.28	(0.64)
Pseudo-R^2	.06		.10		.10		.14		.04		.06		.08		.10	
Log likelihood	-449.79		-430.43		-429.67		-409.11		-503.22		-494.72		-479.60		-469.20	
Number of observations	781		781		781		781		781		781		781		781	
District fixed effects included	No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes	

Weighted logit models estimated with robust standard errors reported in parentheses. * p<.10, two tailed test; ** p<.05; *** p<.01. The dependent variable in models 1a-1d is coded 1 if respondent expressed interest in alternative public school in district, alternative public school in another district, or in alternative charter school, and zero otherwise. The dependent variable in models 2a-2d is coded 1 if respondent expressed interest in alternative private school, and zero otherwise. All explanatory variables rescaled 0-1. Given high number of missing values, income not included in models; most estimates, however, appear unchanged when it is added.

[a] Give child's school an A or a B.
[b] Give child's school a B or lower, but community schools an A or a B.

expresses interest in another public school (see columns 1a and 1b) or private school (columns 2a and 2b). Parents of children in elementary school who do not own their own home appear especially interested in an alternative public school. Hispanics, foreign-born residents, and parents who work full time appear especially interested in sending their child to a private school.

Obviously, when considering an alternative public or private school, parents reflect on the relative strengths of their child's and the community's schools. Columns 1c, 1d, 2c, and 2d report results from models that include two additional variables: the first captures parental satisfaction with their child's school, and the second identifies parents who give a district's schools high marks relative to their child's school. Effects of both variables are highly statistically significant and in the expected direction. Parents who give their child's school an A or a B are significantly less likely to express interest in an alternative public or private school. Parents who give their child's school a B or lower, while giving the community's schools an A or a B, not surprisingly appear positively disposed to exploring alternative public and private schooling options.

Interest in alternative schooling options has less to do with the status of a child's school than with the kinds of families whose children attend the school.

Conclusions

The findings on parental satisfaction have mixed implications for NCLB. On the upside, while the parental satisfaction data reveal general contentment with public schools, they suggest that many parents nonetheless remain interested in exploring alternative schooling options. Interest also appears somewhat greater among parents with children attending underperforming public schools—precisely the people whom NCLB targets. On the downside, parents appear most excited about schooling options that NCLB does not afford. Parents were three to four times more likely to identify a preferred private school than an alternative public school within the district, a public school in another district, or a charter school—and when looking at parents' "most preferred" options, the differences are even greater. When reflecting on their child's education, what these parents claim to want most is a private education.

When selecting schools, parents with children at underperforming schools claim to care about the same things as parents with children at performing schools—with academics foremost among them.

Criteria for Choosing

By extending new schooling opportunities to families with children in underperforming public schools, NCLB gives qualifying parents greater influence over their child's education. Whether the Act should enhance parental influence is another matter entirely. For starters, when selecting among a district's public schools, qualifying parents may not abide by their child's best interests. Rather than selecting a school because of its academic strengths, parents may pay special attention to such ancillary matters as location, racial composition, or sports teams. Further, parents may fail to choose a school that is better than the one their child currently attends. Given that many do not know whether their child's school made AYP (one measure of quality), parents whose children qualify for NCLB's choice provisions may prove incapable of assessing the quality of other district schools.

To investigate these matters, the survey asked parents to rate on a one-to-ten scale the relative importance of nine factors in selecting a school for their child. The results are presented in table 9. Two findings deserve attention, both of which suggest a rather salutary view of parents. The first concerns the rank ordering of school characteristics. Consistent with previous survey research, quality of teaching, discipline, safety and order, and class size are far and away the most important qualities of a school to parents, while location, racial/ethnic composition, and the prevalence of friends are the least important.[31] Moderately important items, by contrast, include programs such as physical education, a school's reputation, and extracurricular programs and sports teams.

Secondly, when comparing the responses of parents at performing and underperforming public schools, the rating and rank ordering of factors are virtually identical. Both groups

Table 9: Parental Assessments of Schooling Options

	All parents		Parents with child attending . . . an underperforming school		a performing school	
	(1)		(2)		(3)	
Importance of the following factors in evaluating a school						
Quality of teaching	9.6	[997]	9.6	[232]	9.6	[702]
Discipline, safety, and order	9.4	[998]	9.4	[232]	9.4	[701]
Class size	8.7	[994]	9.2	[230]	8.6	[701]
Programs such as physical education	8.3	[997]	8.4	[231]	8.3	[701]
Reputation of school	8.1	[995]	8.5	[232]	7.9	[698]
Extracurricular programs and sports teams	7.8	[987]	7.9	[230]	7.8	[694]
Distance from house	6.8	[986]	7.3	[228]	6.6	[695]
Racial/ethnic composition of school	6.2	[978]	6.6	[229]	6.2	[687]
Friends at school	5.8	[983]	5.9	[225]	5.8	[695]

Number of observations in brackets. The items are rated on a 1-10 scale, with 1 indicating not important at all and 10 indicating extremely important.

give quality of teaching and discipline average values of 9.6 and 9.4, respectively; and both rank location, racial/ethnic composition of schools, and friends as the least important factors in evaluating a school. The only difference—which, statistically, may be due to chance alone—concerns the relative importance of programs such as physical education (which parents of children attending schools that made AYP ranked as slightly more important) and a school's reputation (which parents of children at underperforming school deem more important). Given scholars' general skepticism of the ability of less advantaged parents to advocate on behalf of their child's educational welfare, these findings are especially noteworthy.[32] When selecting schools, parents with children at underperforming schools claim to care about the same things as parents with children at performing schools.

To be sure, the factors parents claim to care about most may not reflect the actual choices they would make for their child. As Schneider and Buckley argue, parents' "stated preferences are often not congruent with observed parental behavior, where researchers have found significant effects of race and class."[33] Unfortunately, we do not have any outside measures of parental attitudes that allow us to verify the existence or magnitude of response bias. We do, however, know the names of the schools that parents purport to prefer, establishing some grounds for advancing this line of inquiry. Specifically, by comparing the characteristics of the schools parents prefer to those of the schools their children currently attend, we may further evaluate the capacity of parents to identify schools with students who excel academically.

The first section of table 10 compares average Massachusetts Comprehensive Achievement System (MCAS) test scores of the schools that parents prefer to the scores of schools their children currently attend. Positive values indicate that preferred schools have higher average scores than current schools, negative values that preferred schools have lower scores. Because only a small number of parents prefer a different public school in the district and then can name a specific institution, the findings presented in this table are based on a rather limited number of observations. These results, therefore, should be considered more suggestive than definitive.

Parents, as a whole, consistently identify preferred public schools that score between one-tenth and one-half of a standard deviation higher than their children's current public schools.

Table 10: Characteristics of Preferred Public Schools in District

	All parents		Parents with child attending . . .			
			an underperforming school		A performing school	
	(1)		(2)		(3)	
Differences between test scores of preferred and current public school						
Third grade English	0.12	[57]	0.41	[29]	-0.20	[28]
Fourth grade English	0.32	[57]	0.56	[29]	0.06	[28]
Fourth grade math	0.33	[57]	0.62	[29]	0.00	[28]
Sixth grade math	0.46	[26]	0.50	[10]	0.44	[16]
Differences between student bodies of preferred and current public schools						
% African American students	-2.9	[96]	-9.9	[43]	2.6	[53]
% Hispanic students	-5.5	[96]	0.6	[43]	-10.4	[53]
% White students	7.5	[96]	11.9	[43]	3.9	[53]
% students qualify free/reduced lunch	2.1	[69]	-14.9	[20]	14.5	[40]
% LEP students	-9.8	[96]	-16.0	[43]	-4.8	[53]
Total number of enrolled students	112.7	[96]	-43.4	[43]	237.3	[53]
Percent naming a public school that is underperforming	26.4	[106]	44.1	[44]	15.9	[56]
Percent naming a charter school that is underperforming	52.0	[87]	54.2	[29]	54.7	[53]

Parents who expressed interest in an alternative public school and could name the public school are included in this table. Positive values in the first set of questions indicate that the preferred public school within the district that parents identify has higher test scores (expressed in standard deviations) than the public school their child attends. Positive values in the second set of questions indicate that the preferred public school has a higher percentage of students with the identified characteristic than their child's current school. Number of observations in brackets.

Isolating those parents with children in underperforming schools, the observed differences are even higher, ranging between two- and three-fifths of a standard deviation.[34] Given the results of research on peer effects, students at underperforming schools would likely benefit from gaining access to their parents' preferred schools.[35]

Beyond test scores, how do preferred public schools compare to the schools that children currently attend? The answer very much depends on whether a child is enrolled in an underperforming public school. Interested parents of children who qualify for NCLB's choice provisions identify schools with lower proportions of African-Americans, low-income students, and limited English proficiency (LEP) students, and higher proportions of white students than those their children attend. They also select schools that are slightly smaller, on average. Parents of children in performing schools identify schools with lower proportions of Hispanic students and higher proportions of low-income students than are in their children's schools. They also tend to express interest in schools larger than those their children currently attend. When comparing their selections to those of parents with children in underperforming schools, minor differences are observed with respect to the percentage of white, African-American, and LEP students.

When selecting an alternative public school for their child, interested parents in underperforming schools consistently identify schools with more advantaged and higher performing students, even though many of these schools also failed to make adequate yearly progress.

But take a look at the last two rows of table 10. When asked to name a specific district school or charter school that they would prefer their child attend, a remarkably high percentage of interested parents actually selected other underperforming schools—an option that NCLB forbids. Fully one in four parents selected a district school deemed underperforming, and one in two selected a charter school that failed to make AYP. While parents with children in performing and underperforming public schools are equally likely to select a charter school that failed to make AYP, striking differences emerge when parents choose among a district's public schools. Parents with children in underperforming schools are almost three times as likely to select another underperforming school as are parents with children in performing public schools. Fully 44 percent of parents who qualify for choice under NCLB's criteria want to send their child to another school that is no better—as measured by NCLB standards—than the one their child currently attends.

Conclusions

Two basic findings stand out here, and both speak positively of parents whose children are enrolled in underperforming public schools. First, though parents whose children qualify for NCLB's choice provisions navigate the education landscape with less information, they nonetheless purport to care about the same features of schools—foremost among them being academics—as parents whose children attend performing public schools. Second, when selecting an alternative public school for their child, interested parents in underperforming schools consistently identify schools with more advantaged and higher performing students. To be sure, many of the chosen schools themselves failed to make AYP. And without data on the quality of the teachers or the resources at these institutions, it is difficult to assess whether the schools themselves are any better, or whether they simply enjoy the benefits of enrolling a more elite cadre of students. But even if we accept the premise that preferred schools may not offer to their students a more impressive bundle of services—though it is not clear that we should—these schools nonetheless have managed to attract students with higher test scores; and parents, it seems, would like for these students to be peers to their child.

MATTERS OF POLICY: SUPPORT FOR VOUCHERS

For choice initiatives to gain traction in Massachusetts, parents must both know about them and express interest in taking advantage of the opportunities they present. Absent high participation rates, NCLB's choice provisions and their ilk will eventually be displaced by other more fashionable and promising education reforms. But well before the establishment of any individual program, parents, like all citizens, can contribute to demand for a wider array of education options—namely, by supporting choice initiatives in the political realm.

Who, then, is likely to support programs that expand schooling options presented to parents? The question is deceiving, not least because most adults know very little about such policies and hence are easily swayed by the way in which the question is asked.[36] Framed as a targeted intervention to assist poor, urban children, vouchers and similar notions elicit high praise; framed as a financial drain from public schools so that more advantaged children can attend religious institutions, vouchers receive considerably lower marks.[37]

Rather than constructing (and defending) new voucher questions, we can take guidance from the nation's premier survey on matters relating to education policy and public schools. Every year, Phi Delta Kappa (PDK), in conjunction with the Gallup Organization, surveys citizens regarding their views on public education. And every year, the results receive widespread media attention, as interest groups trumpet the popularity of their favored policy reforms and pundits reflect upon recent changes in public confidence in the schools. The survey is arguably the most important barometer of public views of schools, teachers, and a spate of education policies.

That the PDK survey enjoys a broad circulation, however, does not mean that it provides an unbiased assessment of people's policy views. Figure 1 presents its questions on vouchers. The first, which I label the "well-worded question," is not bad. It does not overtly encourage respondents to answer one way or the other. It simply states what a voucher program is and then asks respondents to pass judgment on it. But the second, which I label the "poorly worded question," is plainly loaded. Rather than conveying any information about the central purpose of a voucher program—namely, to expand the array of educational choices available to qualifying public school parents—the question underhandedly suggests that private school parents will constitute the main recipients. Perhaps more consequentially, by noting that student transfers will be funded "at public expense," it uses pejorative language that would assuredly depress citizens' willingness to support any policy initiative, educational or otherwise. The final two items, which I call "context questions," are meant to elicit respondents' educational priorities. By presenting a false dichotomy between working to improve public schools and abandoning them in favor of private institutions, however, they too present an unfavorable view of choice.

Figure 1: Voucher Questions in Phi Delta Kappa Survey

Well-worded question

"A proposal has been made that would allow parents to send their school-age children to any public, private, or church-related school they choose. For those parents choosing nonpublic schools, the government would pay all or part of the tuition. Would you favor or oppose this proposal in your state?"

Poorly worded question

"Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?"

Contextual questions

(1) "In order to improve public education in America, some people think the focus should be on reforming the existing public school system. Others believe the focus should be on finding an alternative to the existing public school system. Which approach do you think is preferable? Possible answers: reforming the existing public school system; finding an alternative to the existing public school system."

(2) "Which one of these two plans would you prefer? Possible answers: improving and strengthening the existing public schools; or providing vouchers for parents to use in selecting and paying for private and/or church-related schools?"

Parents who claimed to prefer that their child attend a different public or private school were fully 22 percentage points more likely to support vouchers than those who appeared content with their child's current school.

In 2001, controversy erupted when PDK reported that support for vouchers had dropped by roughly 10 percentage points from the previous year, confirming critics' views (and hopes) that the policy reform was losing public favor.[38] In a widely publicized critique of PDK's survey methodology, Terry Moe charged that the observed changes in public support for vouchers did not reflect anything in the real world, but rather alterations in the survey instrument itself—specifically, the addition of new framing questions (including the context questions mentioned above) and changes in the ordering of the well-worded and poorly worded questions.[39] Collectively, Moe argued, these alterations artificially depressed the probability that respondents would endorse vouchers. Moe concluded, "The important changes didn't occur in public opinion. They occurred in the design of PDK's survey."[40]

To assess Moe's claims, and to see whether parents in fact are easily swayed by question wording and context, I conducted the following experiment. I randomly assigned respondents to one of four conditions, each associated with a different ordering of voucher questions. From least to most biased against vouchers, they are as follows: (1) well-worded, poorly worded, context; (2) poorly worded, well-worded, context; (3) context, well-worded, poorly worded; and (4) context, poorly worded, well-worded. Because respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions, the background characteristics of the four populations are held constant, and differences observed can be attributed to changes in question ordering.[41]

Table 11: The Impact of Question Ordering on Parental Support for Vouchers

	Responses to well-worded voucher question	
First ordering [a]		
Favor	50.4%	
Oppose	36.7	
Not sure	13.0	
Total	100.0%	[278]
Second ordering [b]		
Favor	46.2%	
Oppose	44.1	
Not sure	9.7	
Total	100.0%	[238]
Third ordering [c]		
Favor	46.1%	
Oppose	40.8	
Not sure	13.1	
Total	100.0%	[245]
Fourth ordering [d]		
Favor	40.6%	
Oppose	51.1	
Not sure	8.4	
Total	100.0%	[239]

Respondents randomly assigned voucher questions in one of four orderings. Number of observations in brackets. Question wording available in figure 1.

[a] Order of questions: Well-worded, poorly worded, contextual
[b] Order of questions: Poorly worded, well-worded, contextual
[c] Order of questions: Contextual, well-worded, poorly worded
[d] Order of questions: Contextual, poorly worded, well-worded

If parents respond to question ordering in ways that Moe predicts, then recorded levels of support for vouchers should decline as one moves from the first to the fourth condition. From the outset, however, it should be noted that this experiment presents a tough test for Moe's argument. For two reasons, the specific population surveyed here should be especially resistant to slight alterations in question ordering. First, we are examining individuals (public school parents willing to participate in the survey) who assuredly have more information and stronger views about education policy than the general public. And second, parents offered their views on vouchers only after answering a slew of questions about their child's school, their interest in alternative schooling options, and their assessments of the merits of a private education, giving ample preparation for the policy questions to follow. If we find systematic differences in support levels here, they assuredly exist in the nation as a whole.

Moving through the four conditions, Moe predicts that support for vouchers will drop. And so it does. Take a look at the first column of table 11, which presents parents' responses to the well-worded question.[42] When asked the well-worded question right off the bat, 50 percent of parents supported vouchers; when either the poorly worded or the context questions preceded the well-worded question, support dropped to 46 percent; and when both the context and the poorly worded questions preceded the well-worded question, support dropped to just 41 percent. By simply shuffling around the order of questions asked in the middle of a survey, it is possible to depress parents' support for vouchers (again, as measured by the well-worded question) by as much as 10 percentage points.[43]

Table 12 examines the impact of different background characteristics, including question ordering, on parental support for vouchers. As in other regressions, models are estimated both with and without district fixed effects. The first thing to note is that levels of support systematically vary by question ordering, as they did when simple frequencies are compared. The point estimates for orderings 2, 3, and 4 are all negative, and ordering 4 is statistically significant. (Ordering 1, which is the least biased against vouchers, is the baseline category.) Beyond matters of question ordering, however, the results also suggest that vouchers appeal most to African-Americans, people who work full time, and Catholics; owning a home and receiving a high school education negatively affects parents' support for vouchers. Interestingly, having controlled for family and child background characteristics, partisanship does not systematically affect parents' positions on vouchers. Republicans and Independents are no more likely to support vouchers than are Democrats or members of other political parties. Support is highest among parents who are interested in other traditional public, charter, and private schools. Parents who claimed to prefer that their child attend a different public or private school were fully 22 percentage points more likely to support vouchers than those who appeared content with their child's current school.

Table 12: Parental Support for Vouchers

	Support vouchers on well-worded question			
	(1a)		(1b)	
Parent characteristics				
African American	1.05**	(0.33)	0.98***	(0.33)
Hispanic	0.57	(0.46)	0.45	(0.48)
Born in United States	-0.15	(0.31)	-0.19	(0.31)
Education	-1.65***	(0.45)	-1.56***	(0.47)
Work full time	0.32*	(0.18)	0.27	(0.19)
Own home	-0.77***	(0.24)	-0.79***	(0.24)
Married	0.05	(0.24)	-0.09	(0.24)
Female	-0.02	(0.21)	-0.02	(0.22)
Freq. attend religious services	0.50	(0.31)	0.39	(0.31)
Catholic	0.53**	(0.26)	0.53**	(0.27)
Protestant	-0.04	(0.29)	-0.02	(0.30)
Parental involvement				
Volunteer at school	-0.18	(0.19)	-0.16	(0.19)
PTA member	-0.10	(0.20)	-0.10	(0.20)
Work public school	-0.07	(0.21)	-0.08	(0.21)
Additional parental controls				
Prefer alternative school for child	0.89***	(0.18)	0.90***	(0.18)
Republican	0.48	(0.30)	0.46	(0.31)
Independent	0.07	(0.18)	0.05	(0.19)
Question ordering [a]				
Second ordering	-0.20	(0.24)	-0.22	(0.24)
Third ordering	-0.29	(0.25)	-0.30	(0.25)
Fourth ordering	-0.49**	(0.24)	-0.51**	(0.24)
Constant	0.43	(0.54)	0.09	(0.64)
Pseudo-R^2	.14		.15	
Log likelihood	-402.42		-397.57	
Number of observations	675		675	
District fixed effects included	No		Yes	

Logit models estimated with robust standard errors reported in parentheses. * p<.10, two tailed test; ** p<.05; *** p<.01. The dependent variable is coded 1 responded positively to the "well-worded" voucher question and zero otherwise. All explanatory variables rescaled 0-1. Given high number of missing values, income not included in models; most estimates, however, appear unchanged when it is added.

[a] See table 11 and figure 1 for details regarding question ordering on voucher items.

Conclusions

Two important lessons about the politics of school choice emerge from these findings. First, how the issue is framed and in what context it is brought up critically affect the willingness of parents to support a policy initiative. While the debate over school vouchers among elites remains ideologically charged and polarizing, most citizens have thought very little about the matter. The side that successfully frames the public discussion on the topic will likely attract the greatest number of supporters. And second, in matters of education, the personal pervades the political. When parents reflect on a policy like school vouchers, they reflect on the needs and wants of their own children. Those who are basically satisfied with their child's current school generally oppose the initiative, while those who express interest in new schooling options, perhaps not surprisingly, are willing to endorse policy initiatives designed to furnish them.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND SOME MODEST POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

There are ample reasons for criticizing NCLB and state determinations of annual yearly progress. NCLB largely disregards the independent contributions of teachers, principals, and programs to a child's education—to say nothing of the overwhelming influence of family and child background characteristics. Its accountability system holds schools accountable for the performance of multiple subgroups, while refusing to account for student mobility rates, and hence is predisposed to reward racially homogeneous schools whose neighborhood attendance zones contain higher-performing students and to punish heterogeneous schools that cater to lower-performing student bodies. And by measuring student achievement strictly and solely on the basis of standardized tests, the Act disregards important aspects of student learning.

The survey results reveal considerable interest in new public and private schooling options, especially among parents whose children attend underperforming public schools. Though parents who qualify for NCLB's choice provisions give their schools high marks, they nonetheless appear less satisfied than parents with children in performing schools. They are more likely to prefer to send their child to an alternative district, charter, or private school, and most have a specific school in mind. Furthermore, when choosing among alternative schools, parents with children in underperforming schools consistently identify institutions whose students score higher on standardized tests.

Given such interest, why have so few parents changed schools under NCLB? General awareness of the Act does not appear to be a problem. Large margins of parents generally, and parents with children in underperforming schools specifically, claim to have heard of NCLB and its choice provisions. Many of these parents, however, do not know how the law works or who qualifies for new educational opportunities. Only one out of every four parents with children in underperforming Massachusetts public schools successfully identified the school's status and hence grasped the most basic information required to take advantage of NCLB's choice and supplemental services provisions. Whether blame lies with parents or schools (or both), information simply is not getting to those individuals who most need it.

Parents with children at underperforming public schools should be allowed to select any other public school in their district, not just those public schools that made adequate yearly progress.

To raise awareness of NCLB's accountability system and increase the number of students who reap its educational benefits, three policy changes are recommended:

- First, state and federal governments should not rely on districts to disseminate information about which schools have made AYP and which students therefore qualify for transfers and supplemental services. For reasons documented elsewhere, districts have strong incentives to shirk this responsibility.[44] But if parents are to take advantage of new educational opportunities, they first must know about them. To ensure that they do, state and federal governments need to find ways to communicate directly with parents.
- Second, when disseminating information about NCLB, special accommodations must be made on behalf of non-English-speaking families. The low levels of knowledge about NCLB schooling options revealed among parents of children attending underperforming schools was matched only by foreign-born and parents lacking

proficiency in English. Only one in three parents born outside of the United States, and one in four parents of a limited English proficiency child, knew whether or not their child's school was underperforming.[45] If these families are to benefit from NCLB's choice provisions, state and federal governments must find ways of communicating with them effectively.

- Finally, and perhaps most controversially, parents with children at underperforming public schools should be allowed to select any other public school in their district, not just those public schools that made AYP. Almost 50 percent of qualifying and interested parents claimed that they preferred another underperforming public school; none of the findings presented here suggest that these parents were misguided in doing so.[46] If choice is to catch fire, as many NCLB advocates hope, parents must be granted a wider array of schooling options for their children than the law currently affords.

Other policy reforms, of course, might also be entertained. For instance, if choice advocates truly want to satisfy parents, they should add private schools to the menu of available education options. The survey results reported here suggest that a majority of parents may be willing to sign on to vouchers as a policy initiative if it is framed properly. Furthermore, by overwhelming margins, parents prefer private schools over any other schooling option. Of course, many of these parents have in mind elite private schools, which are unlikely to participate in a public school choice scheme anytime soon. And efforts to include any private schools in a government-funded choice initiative are bound to confront serious, and perhaps insurmountable, political challenges from a wide range of organized interests. Each of the three recommended reforms, meanwhile, is more easily implemented. For the most part, they require modest financial commitments and rule changes. And given the observed findings on parents' knowledge of and interest in school choice, each stands a reasonable chance of promoting greater participation in NCLB's choice provisions than witnessed until now.

If choice advocates truly want to satisfy parents, they should add private schools to the menu of available education options. The survey results reported here suggest that a majority of parents may be willing to sign on to vouchers as a policy initiative if it is framed properly.

APPENDIX

Table A-1: Summary Statistics

	Mean	Standard deviation	Indicator Variable
Attend underperforming school	0.25	0.44	Yes
Correctly identify school status	0.49	0.50	Yes
Correctly identify principal	0.52	0.50	Yes
Correctly identify school size	0.40	0.49	Yes
Give own school "A"	0.36	0.48	Yes
Give districts schools "A"	0.15	0.35	Yes
Interested in public school alternative	0.31	0.46	Yes
Interested in private school alternative	0.39	0.49	Yes
African American	0.17	0.38	Yes
Hispanic	0.07	0.25	Yes
Born in United States	0.83	0.38	Yes
Education	0.46	0.23	No
Work full time	0.67	0.47	Yes
Own home	0.77	0.42	Yes
Married	0.77	0.42	Yes
Female	0.75	0.43	Yes
Frequently attend religious services	0.53	0.32	No
Catholic	0.47	0.50	Yes
Protestant	0.24	0.43	Yes
Special needs	0.42	0.49	Yes
Elementary school	0.63	0.48	Yes
Boy	0.57	0.49	Yes
Volunteer at school	0.48	0.50	Yes
PTA member	0.38	0.49	Yes
Work public school district	0.20	0.40	Yes

All variables scaled 0-1; hence, mean values for indicator variables reveal the proportion of Y=1.

Table A-2: Parental Knowledge of Availability of Other Choice Options in District

	Intra-district choice programs				Inter-district choice program				Charter school options			
	(1a)		(1b)		(2a)		(2b)		(3a)		(3b)	
Attends underperforming school	-0.02	(0.23)	-0.03	(0.25)	0.03	(0.22)	0.06	(0.24)	0.92***	(0.34)	0.66	(0.42)
Parent characteristics												
African American	-0.44	(0.32)	-0.76**	(0.36)	0.42	(0.31)	0.43	(0.34)	0.23	(0.38)	0.21	(0.39)
Hispanic	-0.23	(0.43)	-0.25	(0.44)	0.02	(0.41)	-0.07	(0.40)	-0.34	(0.54)	-0.49	(0.67)
Born in United States	-0.10	(0.30)	-0.23	(0.30)	-0.02	(0.27)	-0.16	(0.28)	1.20***	(0.33)	1.37***	(0.35)
Education	-0.68	(0.50)	-0.55	(0.55)	-0.01	(0.46)	-0.03	(0.49)	0.82	(0.60)	1.02	(0.65)
Work full time	0.10	(0.21)	0.13	(0.21)	0.44**	(0.19)	0.49**	(0.20)	0.15	(0.29)	0.27	(0.31)
Own home	0.52**	(0.27)	0.45	(0.28)	-0.09	(0.24)	-0.13	(0.26)	0.28	(0.35)	0.12	(0.42)
Married	-0.34	(0.28)	-0.38	(0.29)	0.34	(0.23)	0.44*	(0.25)	0.30	(0.30)	0.61	(0.39)
Female	0.29	(0.23)	0.33	(0.25)	0.03	(0.21)	0.02	(0.23)	-0.02	(0.32)	0.08	(0.31)
Freq. attend relig. services	0.13	(0.33)	0.09	(0.34)	0.24	(0.33)	0.15	(0.33)	0.20	(0.45)	-0.12	(0.47)
Catholic	-0.32	(0.36)	-0.32	(0.28)	-0.08	(0.25)	0.05	(0.27)	0.69**	(0.35)	0.72*	(0.39)
Protestant	0.27	(0.31)	0.17	(0.32)	0.05	(0.29)	0.09	(0.30)	0.60*	(0.34)	0.37	(0.37)
Child characteristics												
Special needs	-0.04	(0.20)	-0.12	(0.21)	0.31*	(0.18)	0.27	(0.19)	-0.19	(0.26)	-0.19	(0.27)
Elementary school	0.64***	(0.20)	0.77***	(0.22)	-0.35*	(0.19)	-0.30	(0.21)	-0.18	(0.29)	-0.41	(0.30)
Boy	-0.04	(0.20)	0.06	(0.21)	0.03	(0.18)	0.08	(0.19)	-0.41	(0.26)	-0.45	(0.28)
Parental involvement												
Volunteer at school	0.03	(0.21)	0.08	(0.21)	-0.08	(0.19)	0.05	(0.21)	0.22	(0.27)	0.40	(0.30)
PTA member	0.01	(0.22)	0.26	(0.24)	0.14	(0.21)	0.09	(0.23)	0.38	(0.28)	0.48	(0.33)
Work public school district	-0.21	(0.25)	-0.31	(0.25)	0.35	(0.23)	0.41*	(0.23)	0.68*	(0.37)	0.58	(0.41)
Constant	0.49	(0.51)	-0.82	(0.64)	-0.90*	(0.50)	-0.61	(0.58)	-1.11	(0.68)	-2.76***	(0.86)
Pseudo-R^2	.04		.14		.03		.09		.10		.22	
Log likelihood	-475.71		-424.74		-521.21		-491.19		-290.93		-263.15	
Number of observations	781		781		781		781		695		667	
District fixed effects included	No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes	

Weighted logit models estimated with robust standard errors reported in parentheses. * p<.10, two tailed test; ** p<.05; *** p<.01. The dependent variable is coded 1 if respondent correctly identified whether her district offered an intra-district public school choice program (models 1a and 1b), an inter-district program (2a and 2b), or charter schools (3a and 3b), and 0 otherwise. All explanatory variables rescaled 0-1. Given high number of missing values, income not included in models; most estimates, however, appear unchanged when it is added.

ENDNOTES

[1] The Council of the Great City Schools covers 60 districts, 47 of which responded to this particular survey. Michael Casserly, "Driving Change," *Education Next* 4, no. 3 (2004): 32-37.

[2] Chester Finn and Frederick Hess (eds.), *Leaving No Child Behind? Options for Kids in Failing Schools*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

[3] C. Krueger and T. Ziebarth, *No Child Left Behind Policy Brief: School Choice,* Education Commission of the States, 2004.

[4] Opinion Dynamics in Cambridge, Massachusetts, administered the survey. Survey questions are available online at www.pioneerinstitute.org/research/schoolchoicesurvey.

[5] So that they reflect a random draw of parents in the sampled locales, findings presented in this paper rely upon weights that account for the sizes of the district populations.

[6] In a handful of cases, questions were directed toward parents of children who attend private schools. The results presented below do not change when these cases are excluded from the sample.

[7] As previously mentioned, we want to focus on those students who are in the best position to exercise choice under NCLB. Because elementary schools greatly outnumber middle and high schools in most communities, it makes perfect sense for the youngest child, rather than, say, the child with the next birthday, to be the subject of inquiry.

[8] Students in grades kindergarten through 12 constituted 13.6, 10.7. 9.7, 8.6, 8.2, 6.0, 6.7, 8.7, 5.7, 6.7, 6.2, 6.1, and 1.6 percent of the sample, respectively. In 1.5 percent of the cases, the respondent did not know the student's grade.

[9] This estimated response rate assumes that the incident rate among those of unknown eligibility (usually because they did not stay on the telephone long enough for us to determine whether they had a child attending a public school) is the same as the incident rate among those of known eligibility. If the incident rate among non-compliers is lower, which is likely given the subject of the survey and the population we targeted, then the true response rate is higher than 31 percent.

[10] Available demographic data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) suggest that the survey contains the right approximate proportion of African-Americans, an under-sample of Hispanics, and an over-sample of whites. (Given the varying methods of collecting demographic data, race/ethnicity provides the cleanest of comparisons.) In the survey, 17 percent of the parents are non-Hispanic African-American, 7 percent are Hispanic, and 73 percent of parents are non-Hispanic white. According to NCES records, 17 percent of parents with children attending public school living in the ten largest school districts are non-Hispanic African-American, 23 percent are Hispanic, and 46 percent are non-Hispanic white. The magnitude of the observed discrepancies for Hispanics is sufficiently large to warrant some concern. (The remaining 13 percent is composed of American Indian and Alaska, Asian, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander and people of two or more races.) Those Hispanic parents who are included in the survey, it is fair to assume, probably speak better English, have higher education, and are more likely to own their own home than the larger population of Hispanics targeted (because the survey was conducted using a listed sample). To the extent that this is true, the survey probably will over-estimate their knowledge of NCLB.

[11] For an overview of choice programs in the state of Massachusetts, see *Mapping School Choice in Massachusetts: Data and Findings, 2003* (Cambridge: Center for Education Research & Policy at MassINC). For a summary of choice programs nationwide, see Krista Kafer, *School Choice 2003: How States Are Providing Greater Opportunity in Education* (Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation).

[12] Of those who say they have heard about NCLB, 59 percent received their information from the media, 24 percent from the school district, 7 percent from other parents, 3 percent from friends and family, and the rest from assorted sources.

[13] See Phillip Converse, "The nature of belief systems in mass publics," in D. Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: Free Press, 1964); Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). We also asked parents whether their districts offered intra-district choice programs, inter-district choice, and charter schools. Because we know which district parents lived in, we again were able to verify their responses. When asked about the availability of intra-district choice options, 68 percent of parents answered correctly, 26 percent incorrectly, and 6 percent said they did not know. (Six of the 10 districts offered some kind of intra-district choice program.) When asked about inter-district choice options, 45 percent answered correctly, 38 percent incorrectly, and 17 percent said they did not know. (All districts in Massachusetts allow students to attend public schools in schools outside of their boundaries, provided that they can find transportation to another district that will accept them; students in all of the ten largest districts took advantage of this option.) And finally, when asked about the presence of charter schools in their area, 81 percent answered correctly, 13 percent incorrectly, and 6 percent said they did not know. (Eight of the ten largest districts have charter schools; because of inter-district choice options, students in every district attend charter schools.)

[14] Because attendance at an underperforming school has no bearing on students' eligibility for intra- or inter-district choice programs or charter schools, one would not expect their parents to have higher levels of awareness of these schooling options. The data confirm as much. Neither simple comparisons of means nor multivariate analyses reveal differential levels of knowledge about these schooling options by school status. See table A-2 in the Appendix for multivariate results.

[15] In most models, estimates are virtually identical when employing multiple imputation to deal with missing data. See Gary King, "Analyzing Incomplete Political Science Data: An Alternative Algorithm for Multiple Imputation," *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 1 (2001): 46-69.

[16] By including a vector of dummy variables, the models allow for baseline propensities to vary across districts.

[17] As shown in table A-2 in the Appendix, models that estimate parental awareness of intra- and inter-district choice options and charter schools do not perform anywhere near as well as those presented in table 3. For instance, significant effects are occasionally observed for place of birth but never for education. Most other family background characteristics also generate null effects.

[18] See Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); David E.Campbell, "Participation in Context: How Communities and Schools Shape Civic Engagement," government dissertation, Harvard University, Cambridge, 2002.

[19] William Howell, "Dynamic Selection Effects in Urban, Means-Tested School Voucher Programs," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 22, no. 3 (2004): 225-250.

[20] These findings, however, do not appear to carry over to other state educational programs and initiatives. As shown in table A-2 in the Appendix, neither religious identity nor practices appear to have any relationship to parental knowledge of intra- or inter-district choice plans or charter schools.

[21] Virtually identical results are observed in models that predict the probability that parents are aware of intra- and inter-district choice plans and charter schools. As shown in table A-2 in the Appendix, five of six coefficients are positive, but none are statistically significant.

[22] When estimating the probability that parents know about intra- and inter-district choice plans and the presence of charter schools, these effects attenuate somewhat. Significant effects are only observed for parents who work in public schools in models that predict awareness of charter schools and inter-district choice plans. Again, see table A-2 in the Appendix.

[23] Asked where they learned about the status of their child's school, 36 percent of parents indicated the district or school, 25 percent a newspaper or television news story, 4 percent other parents, 3 percent the internet, 2 percent a friend, and the rest did not know the source of the information.

[24] V. Price and John Zaller, "Who Gets the News? Alternative Measures of News Reception and their Implications for Research," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 57 (1993): 133-164.

[25] Curiously, parents who received their information directly from the school or school district were 4 percentage points *less* likely to identify the status of the school correctly than were parents who received their information from other outlets. With these data alone, however, it is impossible to know whether poor school communications or characteristics of families who rely exclusively on districts for information are to blame.

[26] See any of the annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup polls of public attitudes toward public schools, which are available online at www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kpollpdf.htm.

[27] Of those parents who were aware of intra- and inter-district school choice options, we asked whether their child's school was their first choice. Overall, 85 percent of parents claimed that it was. And as one would expect, these parents expressed significantly higher satisfaction rates. Forty-one percent of parents who placed their child in their most preferred school gave their school an A, as compared to 20 percent of parents who did not.

[28] When estimating models that account for the full range of possible grades that parents could give schools, such as ordered probits, the effect of attending an underperforming school on parental satisfaction with their child's own school remains highly statistically significant; its effect on parental satisfaction with community schools, however, is not statistically significant. For the most part, the decision to estimate logit or ordered probit models has little bearing on estimates for background covariates.

[29] John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Congress as Public Enemy: Public Attitudes toward American Political Institutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[30] Told that "costs were not an obstacle," most of these interested parents appeared to relish the idea of sending their child to an expensive, elite private school. Four of the five private schools most often identified by parents were Milton Academy, Worcester Academy, Bancroft Academy, and McDuffie, all independent schools with tuitions that eclipse the monetary values of even the most generous school vouchers offered in public and private programs around the country and have admission standards that few students can meet. Still, roughly one-third of interested parents identified Catholic and Protestant day schools that charge considerably more modest tuitions.

[31] See William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson, *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2002); Terry Moe, *Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001); Mark Schneider, Paul Teske, and Melissa Marschall, *Choosing Schools: Consumer Choice and the Quality of American Schools* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2000); D. Armor and B. Peiser, "Interdistrict Choice in Massachusetts," in P.E. Peterson and B.C. Hassel (eds.), *Learning from School Choice* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998).

[32] Jennifer Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick, *The American Dream and the Public Schools* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Carol Ascher, Norm Fruchter, and Robert Berne, *Hard Lessons: Public School and Privatization* (Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1996); Carnegie Foundation, *School Choice* (Menlo Park: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1992); Bruce Fuller, Richard Elmore, and Gary Orfield, *Who Chooses? Who Loses? Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996); Amy Wells, "The Sociology of School Choice: Why Some Win and Others Lose in the Educational Marketplace," in E. Rassell and R. Rothstein (eds.), *School Choice: Examining the Evidence* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 1993); Jeffrey Henig, *Rethinking School Choice: Limits of the Market Metaphor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[33] Mark Schneider and Jack Buckley, "What do Parents Want from Schools? Evidence from the Internet," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 24, no. 2 (2002): 113-144. For other studies that examine the educational priorities of parents in non-survey settings, see also Armor and Peiser, "Interdistrict Choice in Massachusetts;" Jeffrey Henig, "Choice in Public Schools: An Analysis of Transfer Requests among Magnet Schools," *Social Science Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (1990): 69-82; Howell, "Dynamic Selection Effects in Urban, Means-Tested School Voucher Programs." It should be noted, though, that the findings in table 9 do not show that race is unimportant—only that it is less important than the other factors listed.

[34] Test scores for seventh, eighth, and tenth graders are omitted given the tiny number of observations available. All values for these grade levels remain positive for both parents as a whole and parents with children in underperforming schools.

[35] See Eric Hanushek, John Kain, and Steven G. Rivkin, "New Evidence about Brown v. Board of Education: The Complex Effects of School Racial Composition on Achievement," National Bureau of Economic Research, 2002; Caroline Minter Hoxby, "Peer Effects in the Classroom: Learning from Gender and Race Variation," National Bureau of Economic Research, 2002.

[36] "On Thin Ice: How Advocates and Opponents Could Misread the Public's Views on Vouchers and Charter Schools," *Public Agenda*, 1999.

[37] Terry Moe, *Schools, Vouchers, and the American Public*.

[38] Lowell Rose and Alec Gallup, *The 33rd Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes toward the Public Schools* (Phi Delta Kappa International, 2001).

[39] Terry Moe, "Cooking the Questions?" *Education Next* 2, no. 1 (2002): 71-77.

[40] Ibid., 77.

[41] To ensure that the randomization worked as intended, I compared the demographic background characteristics of respondents in each of the four conditions. In no instance did I observe differences between groups on a variable that had a significant relationship to respondents' support for vouchers. In addition, I experimented with a variety of weighting schemes, and results changed hardly at all. And finally, the effects reported here hold up in multivariate settings.

[42] In the context of this experimental design, weights are not employed when simple frequencies are reported.

[43] A question's phrasing obviously matters just as much as its location within a survey. Across the various question orderings, support for the well-worded question averaged 48 percent, while support on the poorly worded question hovered around 36 percent. After the experiment, the survey contained additional questions intended to measure parental support for voucher and school choice. When asked, "Would you agree or disagree with the following statement: one way to improve public schools in this state is to increase the amount of choice parents have about where to send their children," 60 percent of parents agreed, 35 percent disagreed, and 5 percent said they did not know. Subsequently, the following was put to survey respondents: "One of the main issues in education is money. Some people say money should follow the child, so that if a child transfers to a private school, a different district or charter school, money that would have been spent by the child's home district should be transferred to the new school. In this way, schools would be forced to compete and improve. Others say that reducing funding for districts that lose students will only make these weak districts even weaker. Which of these is closer to your opinion?" On this item, 38 percent claimed that money should follow the student, 51 percent that it should not follow the student, and 11 percent said they were not sure. Unlike tables 11 and 12, all of the figures presented in this footnote are weighted.

[44] Finn and Hess, *Leaving No Child Behind? Options for Kids in Failing Schools*.

[45] Given the survey's under-sampling of Hispanics, these findings probably *overestimate* the levels of knowledge of NCLB among foreign-born families and those whose English proficiency is limited.

[46] Another more practical concern supports this policy recommendation. As Massachusetts schools are held accountable for the test scores of subpopulations of students, the list of underperforming schools will undoubtedly rise, further limiting the number of schools that can accept student transfers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

WILLIAM G. HOWELL joined the Government Department at Harvard University as an assistant professor in 2002. He previously taught at the University of Wisconsin, after receiving his Ph.D. in political science at Stanford University in 2000. Howell has written on separation-of-powers issues, American political institutions, and education policy, publishing research in such venues as *International Organization*, *Journal of Politics*, *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, Legislative Studies Quarterly*, *American Behavioral Scientist,* and *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization*. He is the author of *Power without Persuasion: The Politics of Direct Presidential Action* and is currently working on book that examines how domestic political institutions constrain the president's ability to exercise military force abroad.

Howell has also written on a wide variety of education policy initiatives, including school vouchers, charter schools, and the No Child Left Behind Act. He has participated in evaluations of school voucher programs in Cleveland, Ohio; New York City; Washington, D.C.; Dayton, Ohio; and San Antonio, Texas, which have received extensive national media recognition. He is the principal co-author, with Paul Peterson, of *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools* and is the editor of the forthcoming *Besieged: School Boards and the Future of Education Politics*. He currently serves as Deputy Director of the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University.

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