



Predictors of parents' satisfaction with their children's school

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278

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to identify factors of parent satisfaction, then identify predictors of overall school satisfaction among three groups of variables: district characteristics, parent demographics, and school satisfaction factors. Despite the importance of parents in the success of schoolchildren, few empirical studies address the complexities and factor structure of parent satisfaction with their children's school.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper reports findings from a survey of 30,279 parents from 121 schools in 27 school districts across the USA conducted by Harris Interactive, Inc. The researchers employed factor analysis to identify factors of parent satisfaction, and then regressed overall satisfaction on district characteristics, demographic variables, and satisfaction factors.

Findings – In this paper three parent satisfaction factors were found: the extent to which parents received adequate information from the school about their children, and the degree of involvement the school and teachers afforded them, the adequacy of school resources, and the extent to which school leadership (Board of Education and School Superintendent) was effective and managed the school budget well. These factors significantly predicted overall parent/school satisfaction even after district and demographics were controlled.

Originality/value – The study increases one's understanding of the underlying factors that explain parent satisfaction, and demographic, and district characteristics that predict parents' satisfaction. The findings suggest factors that school administrators manage these factors in order to improve parent satisfaction.

Keywords Demographics, Parents, Schools, United States of America

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Recent legislation that empowers parents to choose their children's schools underscores the importance that parent satisfaction with their children's school hold for school leaders (Bauch and Goa, 2000; File *et al.*, 1992; Poterfield, 2003; Taylor and Baker, 1994; US Department of Education, 2002). The relationship between parent satisfaction with their children's school and school choice seems intuitively obvious, yet few studies have explored what constitutes parental school satisfaction (Hausman and Goldring, 2000), and school and district characteristics associated with dissatisfaction. Past research has shown that school communication, parent involvement, academic achievement, curriculum, school environment, school safety, staff quality, transportation are related to overall parent satisfaction (Bond and King,



2003; DeVoe *et al.*, 2004; Erickson, 1996; Goldring and Shapira, 1993; Griffith, 1997; Ham *et al.*, 2003; Maddaus, 1990; McGrew and Gilman, 1991; Tuck, 1995). This research indicates that parent school satisfaction is multidimensional and includes both academic (e.g. curriculum) and non-academic factors such as school safety (Hausman and Goldring, 2000). The elements of parent satisfaction are numerous and vary across studies. In addition, some of the studies include samples limited to specific school systems and locations (Thompson, 2003). A more parsimonious accounting of parents' satisfaction with their children's schools is needed.

Few studies have investigated the factor structure of parent satisfaction and the relationship between district characteristics, parent demographics, and satisfaction factors with parents' satisfaction with their children's schools. Research regarding parent's minority status conclude that minority parents are generally less satisfied than non-minority parents, and that factors that lead to parent satisfaction are different depending upon the parents' ethnic background (Friedman *et al.*, 2006); Johnson and Kafer, 2002; Thompson, 2003; Erickson, 1996; Robinson-Zanartu and Majel-Dixon, 1996). Griffith (2000) examined the relationship between the consensus between parents and their children regarding the learning and social environment of their schools and structural and student population characteristics of the school. Specifically, Griffith studied student to faculty ratio, class size, percentages of school utilization (student enrollment/planned student capacity, students new to the school and district, students enrolled in the free and reduced meals, and the English for speakers of other languages program. In general, Griffith found that several structural variables were related to the consensus between parents and their children, but the impact of these variables on parent satisfaction was not the focus of the study.

It is important that school administrators understand aspects of the factors that lead to parent satisfaction in an era where parents have a voice in choosing the schools their children attend. Friedman *et al.* (2006) derived a conceptual model of parent school satisfaction from the literature, including research conducted by Harris Interactive (Figure 1). The model indicates that parents evaluate their children's school on a number of variables including teachers, administrators, curriculum, technology, facilities, involvement, transportation, and budget. These variables may influence the parents' satisfaction with their children's schools and parents' minority status may influence the relative importance of these variables to the parents (Friedman *et al.*

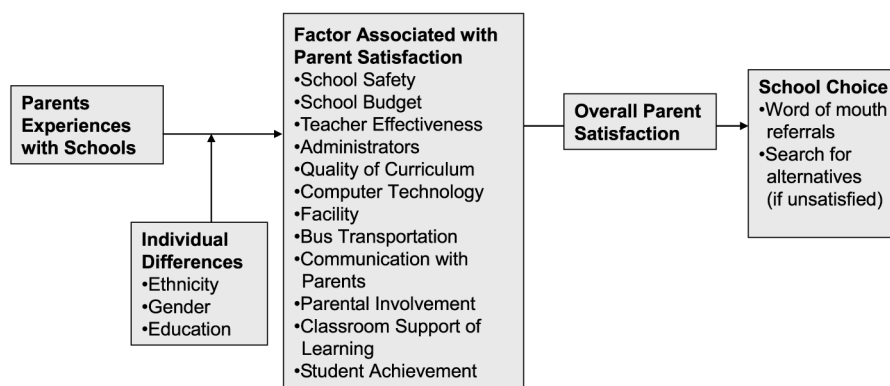


Figure 1. A conceptual model of parent school satisfaction

2006). Parental satisfaction is related to parents' school choice decisions and search behaviors for the best possible school for their children (File *et al.*, 1992; Taylor and Baker, 1994). This study focuses on components of parent satisfaction components and their relationship to overall parent satisfaction.

Research questions

This study seeks to identify factors that best describe parents' satisfaction with their children's schools, and identify predictors of overall parent satisfaction. The specific research questions appear below.

RQ1 What factors account for parent's satisfaction with their children's schools?

RQ2 What district characteristics predict overall school satisfaction?

RQ3 What parent demographic characteristics predict overall school satisfaction?

RQ4 What is the variance accounted for by the satisfaction factors after controlling for district characteristics and parent demographics?

Methodology

Harris Interactive Inc., a market research firm located in Rochester, NY, that conducts nationwide polls and specializes in educational research, collected the data as part of school improvement projects during 2002-2005. Prior to questionnaire administration, parents or guardians of elementary, middle school, and high school children received a letter that explained the purpose of the study and expressed District Superintendent's support. The Parent Satisfaction Questionnaire was included with the letter with a postage-paid return envelope. All questionnaires were completely anonymous. Completed questionnaires were collected from 121 schools representing 27 school districts across the USA. A total of 32 percent ($N = 31, 113$) of the parents or guardians voluntarily returned completed questionnaires.

Questionnaire

The Parent Satisfaction Questionnaire measures parents' satisfaction with their children's school. Friedman *et al.* (2006) contains a description of the questionnaire's development, which began in 1993 with 12 extensive focus groups conducted with school stakeholder groups (e.g. parents, administrators, teachers and students). Focus group participants brainstormed general categories of parent satisfaction. This information, combined with literature reviews conducted by Harris Interactive, Inc., produced experiential and attitudinal questionnaire items, which were then refined over the last 13 years to increase reliability and minimize multicollinearity between items. The questionnaire currently measures 15 areas of parents' experience with their children's school. All but two of the 13 areas have a series of items requiring responses on dichotomous scales. For example, one questionnaire item was "Does your child receive enough individual attention from teachers?" which requires a yes/no response. Likewise, another questionnaire item was "How well does your school do in including parents' views when making decisions?" which uses a satisfactory/needs improvement response. The questionnaire contains 87 dichotomous response scale items. Dichotomous scales minimize multicollinearity and maximize the actionability of the recommendations made to clients (Wittink and Bayer, 1994). The dichotomous scales

measure events, circumstances, and conditions experienced by parents as they relate to the schools. Experiential measures are important because they provide specific feedback to schools for decision-making purposes. Dichotomous scales allow subsequent analyses to which parent experiences contribute most to school satisfaction. Parents choose between questionnaires in English or Spanish.

A total of 13 multi-item indices measuring aspects of parents' experience with their children's school were developed:

- (1) Facilities and equipment.
- (2) Computer technology.
- (3) School bus.
- (4) School communication.
- (5) Parental involvement.
- (6) Teacher effectiveness.
- (7) Teacher communication.
- (8) Board of education.
- (9) Superintendent and central office.
- (10) Principal.
- (11) Curriculum.
- (12) Training.
- (13) School budget.

The researchers omitted the School Bus index as a diminishing number of parents reported that their children used school transportation in middle and high school. Items where few parents responded (e.g. does your child have a learning disability) were omitted from the analysis. Parents rated the overall satisfaction for their child's school (current school year) using a ten point rating scale. An overall satisfaction scale used a grade format ranging from "A" (excellent) to "F" (unacceptable). The "grades" were recoded so that "A" equaled 10, "B + " equaled 8, and so forth. Parents also indicated whether they were proud of their child's school and if they would recommend the school to other parents. An overall satisfaction index consisting of these three variables served as the dependent variable.

In total, 13 district, parent, and student variables were included in the analysis. The questionnaire contained items that measured parents' minority status (dummy coded as 0 = non-minority, 1 = minority), gender (dummy coded as 0 = male, 1 = female), education, number of children in the school district, and school level of child. School level was coded as two dummy variables: elementary (0 = no, 1 = yes) and high school (0 = no, 1 = yes). Parent's education was considered a continuous variable where 1 = did not complete high school, 2 = high school, 3 = some college or Technical school, 4 = completed two year college, 5 = completed four year college, and 6 = graduate degree. Questionnaire items also measured the students' gender (dummy coded as 0 = male, 1 = female) and most recent report card grade. Student grade was measured on a letter school grade scale where A = excellent, B + = good, C + = average, D + = poor, and F = unacceptable.

The Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2006) database provided district enrollment, student/teacher ratio, percent minority, median family income, urbanicity, and expenditure per student. District urbanicity was considered a continuous variable using the NCES coding based on population attributes such as density, where 1 = large city, 2 = mid-size city, 3 = fringe of large city, 4 = fringe of mid-size city, 5 = large town, 6 = small town, 7 = rural, outside Core Based Statistical Area (CBSA)/Metropolitan Statistical area (MSA), and 8 = rural, inside CBSA/MSA.

Data analysis

The authors determined a parsimonious set of factors that accounted for parent satisfaction with their children's schools across a wide range of school districts. Then the satisfied and dissatisfied parents were differentiated based on the demographic characteristics of the parents, the district characteristics, and the school characteristics.

The researchers computed indices for all questionnaire categories. Index reliability was determined using Cronbach's Alpha. The researchers omitted items that reduced reliability. As the indices varied in the number of items, indices were standardized using z scores. These school satisfaction indices were then factor analyzed in order to determine a more parsimonious account of parents' school satisfaction. The researchers used a principal component factor analysis extraction method with a varimax rotation method with Kaiser Normalization. Factors were selected based on their variance accounted, eigenvalues of one or greater, cross loadings, and interpretability.

In order to identify predictors of parents' satisfaction with the school their children attend, the researchers conducted a multiple regression analysis. The parent overall satisfaction index was regressed on parent demographic characteristics, district characteristics, and school satisfaction factor scores. A total of 26 district dummy variables were also regressed on the overall satisfaction index to determine the percent of variance in the dependent variable accounted for by the district the parents reside in.

Sample

The total number of respondents to the Parent Satisfaction Questionnaire was 30,279. In total, 37 percent of the respondents were minorities, 82 percent were female, had an average of 2.11 children in the school district (51 percent of which were female). A total of 22 percent and 18 percent of the parents' highest level of education obtained was some college/technical school and high school, respectively (see Table I).

Regarding the district characteristics, the average enrollment was 7,016 with a teacher/student ratio of 15.91, 22 percent minority population, median family income of \$52,475, and an expenditure of \$8,019 per student. In total, 32 percent of the parents resided in school districts located in the fringe of a mid size city, and 19 percent were located in a mid sized city. Regarding school level, 19,843 (65 percent), 5,287 (18 percent), and 5149 (17 percent) of the parents reported that their child attended elementary school, middle school and high school, respectively.

Results

Table II describes the indices used in the study with respect to reliability, number of items, definition and a representative item. The overall satisfaction index achieved

	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	Parents' satisfaction with school
Demographics				
Percent minority (parent)	31,113	0.37	0.48	
Percent female (parent)	28,895	0.82	0.37	
Education (parent) ^a	27,230	3.51	1.53	
Parents' children in district	28,710	2.11	1.02	
Percent female (student)	28,171	0.51	0.50	
Student grade ^b	27,966	8.06	2.05	
District characteristics ^c				
Enrolment	30,420	7,016	4,132	
Student/teacher ratio	29,124	15.91	2.19	
Percent minority	30,426	0.22	0.23	
Median family income	30,426	52,475	15,475	
Urbanicity ^d	29,539	3.59	1.76	
Expenditure per student	28,949	8,019	1,401	

283

Notes: ^aParents' education was considered a continuous variable where 1 = did not complete high school, 2 = high school, 3 = some college or Technical school, 4 = completed two year college, 5 = completed four year college, and 6 = graduate degree; ^b Student grade was measured on a letter school grade scale where A = excellent, B+ = good, C+ = average, D+ = poor, and F = unacceptable. Grades were recoded where A = 10, B+ = 8, and so forth; ^c District enrollment, student/teacher ratio, percent minority, urbanicity, and expenditure per student were obtained from the Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) database. Percent free/reduced school lunch program and median family income were obtained from the districts surveyed; ^d District Urbanicity was considered a continuous variable using the NCES coding based on population attributes such as density, where 1 = large city, 2 = mid-size city, 3 = fringe of large city, 4 = fringe of mid-size city, 5 = large town, 6 = small town, 7 = rural, outside Core Based Statistical Area (CBSA)/Metropolitan Statistical area (MSA), and 8 = rural, inside CBSA/MSA

Table I.
Sample descriptive statistics

reliability was 0.84. Cronbach's alpha reliabilities for all other indices ranged between 0.65 and 0.87 and were generally acceptable to use in further analyses.

Table III contains the factor analysis results of the twelve school satisfaction indices. A three-factor solution resulted: parent communication and involvement, school resources, and leadership and budget. Together, the three factors accounted for 63 percent of the variance. Only two indices had cross loadings above 0.30 (budget and curriculum), but were added to increase factor interpretability. Parent communication and involvement was the most important factor accounting for 41 percent of the variance. This factor addresses parent satisfaction with the information teachers and the school provide regarding the child's performance and school events, opportunities for involvement in their child's education. The second factor, school resources, refers to the extent the school provides adequate computers, equipment and facilities, and an adequate curriculum. The third factor, leadership and budget, refers to the perceived effectiveness of the school and district administrators, particularly their handling of the school budget.

The second factor, school resources explained 12 percent of the variance. This factor concerns parent satisfaction with the school's computer technology, facilities and equipment, training opportunities for the children, and the adequacy of the curriculum offer to children. The third factor, leadership and budget accounted for 9 percent of the variance. Leadership and budget addresses parent satisfaction with the District Board

Table II.
Independent and
dependent variable
reliability

Index	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of items	Definition	Sample Item ^a
Overall satisfaction School facilities	0.84	3	Parents' overall satisfaction with their children's school	Are you proud of your child's school?
	0.73	10	School equipment, resources, and grounds, including textbooks, buildings, lunch room, and library	Does the library meet your child's needs?
Computer technology School communication	0.65	4	Extent to which computers meet students' needs	Do school computers help your child to learn?
	0.78	4	Extent to which the school keeps parents informed about school activities, student academic and other progress, provides parent conferences, etc.	How well does your school do in keeping you informed about your child's academic progress?
Parental involvement	0.75	5	Extent that the school allows parents to be involved in their child's education, and get involved in decision making	How well does your school do in including parents' views when making decisions?
Teacher effectiveness	0.68	7	Teacher effectiveness with respect to providing individual attention to child, challenging children to learn, homework, treating parents with respect, etc.	Do teachers challenge your child to learn?
Teacher communication	0.79	5	The extent of teachers' communication with parents, including children's accomplishments, problems, and teacher accessibility	Do teachers communicate with you when your child does something well?
Board of education	0.85	6	Board of Education performance in such areas as improving course offerings and improving the quality of instruction	Rate the performance of the Board of Education: improving the overall quality of instruction
Superintendent and central office	0.87	6	Superintendent/Central office performance in such areas as improving course offerings and improving the quality of instruction	Rate the performance of the Superintendent/Central office: improving the overall quality of instruction
Principal	0.72	6	Principal effectiveness with respect to areas such as resolving problems, and providing support.	Were you satisfied with support provided by the principal?
Curriculum	0.78	6	The effectiveness of the school curriculum with respect to such areas as required courses, courses for advanced students, children with disabilities, college preparation courses, and preparation for standardized tests	How would you rate the required academic curriculum?
Training	0.77	6	Training offered by the school in areas such as drugs, AIDS, crime, and computer use	How would you rate your training in the use of computers?
School budget	0.72	4	The extent to which the school budget provides value for the tax dollar, and the school is responsible in handling school finances	Do your schools give good value for your tax dollar?

	Communication and involvement	Factor Resources	Leadership and budget
Teacher communication	0.83	0.11	0.06
School communication	0.81	0.16	0.14
Parent involvement opportunities	0.76	0.23	0.19
Teacher effectiveness	0.69	0.26	0.09
Principal effectiveness	0.51	0.12	0.22
Computer technology	0.09	0.76	0.04
Training opportunities	0.21	0.70	0.28
School facilities	0.24	0.68	0.15
Curriculum	0.27	0.59	0.33
Superintendent	0.16	0.16	0.90
Board of Education	0.18	0.20	0.90
Budget process and value	0.20	0.39	0.50

Table III. Rotated factor loadings^a for three factor solution assessing parent school satisfaction with their children's school

Note: ^aPrincipal component analysis extraction method with a varimax rotation method with Kaiser normalization was used

of Education and school superintendent performance, and their ability to manage the school budget and provide value for the budget dollar.

Table IV reports the results of parent overall satisfaction regressed on the district dummy variables, district characteristics, parent demographics, and school satisfaction factors. Model 1 represents the regression of the overall satisfaction on the district dummy variables only. The resultant variance accounted for by the

	Model 2 ^a		Model 3 ^b		Model 4 ^c	
	β	<i>t</i>	β	<i>t</i>	β	<i>t</i>
District/school characteristics						
Student/teacher ratio	0.10	3.49***	-0.11	4.20***	0.00	0.16
Percent minority	-0.04	-4.85***	-0.03	-3.51***	-0.01	2.45*
Expenditure per student	0.06	6.91***	0.06	6.74***	0.03	3.91***
Elementary school	0.21	28.88***	0.19	26.96***	0.06	10.08***
High school	-0.01	-1.25	0.00	-0.31	0.04	7.05***
Parent demographics						
Percent minority (parent)			0.01	0.23	-0.00	-0.21
Percent female (parent)			-0.01	-2.57**	-0.00	-1.05
Education (parent)			-0.04	-6.69***	0.02	4.14***
Number of children in district			-0.03	-6.01***	-0.01	-2.50*
Child's gender			-0.02	4.04***	-0.01	2.09**
Child's grade			0.20	35.98***	0.09	21.13***
School satisfaction factors						
Communication and involvement					0.38	71.10***
Resources					0.21	38.93***
Leadership/budget					0.11	21.37***

Table IV. Parent overall school satisfaction regressed on district characteristics, parent demographics and school satisfaction factors (*n* = 30, 279)

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p > 0.01$, *** $p > 0.001$; ^aModel 1 regressed overall satisfaction on the 26 district dummy variables. The resultant R^2 was only 0.03. For purposes of clarity, this model was omitted, but can be obtained from the first author; ^b $R^2 = 0.07$, R^2 change = 0.03, $F(6, 30243) = 223.53$ ($p > 0.001$); ^c $R^2 = 0.41$, R^2 change = 0.29, $F(3, 30, 240) = 4, 998.76$ ($p > 0.001$)

districts was significant but not meaningful ($R^2 = 0.03, F_{(24,30254)}, p > 0.001$). Models 2, 3 and 4 represent successive regression analyses regressing overall satisfaction on district characteristics, parent demographics and school satisfaction factors. The addition of the district characteristic variables (Model 2) increased the R^2 from 0.03 to 0.08 ($F_{(5,30254)} = 352.02, p > 0.011$). The addition of the parent demographics increased the R^2 to 0.14 ($F_{(6,30243)} = 388.37, p > 0.001$). Although these results are statistically significant, the increase in variance explained is modest. In contrast, the addition of the satisfaction factors (Model 4) significantly increased the R^2 to 0.46 ($F_{(3,30240)} = 5782.14, p > 0.001$). The variables with the largest standardized beta weights were the three school satisfaction factors, followed by the child's grade and elementary school. Two district characteristics, enrollment and urbanicity, were removed from the multiple regression equations in all models as their F values to remove exceeded $p > 0.10$.

Discussion

This study examined empirically predictors of parents' satisfaction with their children's school. The researchers identified three factors of school satisfaction: communication and involvement, school resources, and the quality of leadership and budget adequacy. These three factors significantly and meaningfully predicted parents' overall satisfaction even after controlling for variance due to the district in which the children attended, district characteristics and parent demographics.

Limitations of the current research pertain to the nature of the sample and the degree to which the conceptual model was tested. Regarding the sample, parent questionnaire responses were part of a convenience sample obtained through school improvement efforts conducted across the USA. Schools that choose to measure and improve parent satisfaction were therefore included in the study. Additionally, the response rate to the mailed questionnaire was thirty-four percent. However, the size and diversity of the sample increases the confidence that the study findings generalize to other schools. The sample contains responses from 30,279 parents from 121 schools in 27 school districts across the USA. The sample was also comparable to the overall NCES database with respect to the control variables, making generalizability more feasible. Several of the control variables were at the district level, as individual level data was not available or deemed too obtrusive to ask in the survey (e.g. household income). Second, the study partially tested the parent school satisfaction conceptual model. Future research should explore the linkage between parent school satisfaction and school choice.

Past research has delineated variables related to teacher satisfaction, yet fewer studies address parent satisfaction. This study increases our understanding parent school satisfaction by identifying three factors: communication and involvement the school and teachers afford parents, the adequacy of school resources, and school leadership effectiveness (Board of Education and School Superintendent). The findings help school administrators identify areas of parents dissatisfaction that, if addressed, can improve their schools. School administrators should first diagnose the factors by which parents perceive and evaluate their children's school, identify segments of parent dissatisfaction among this important group, maintain the satisfaction of parents that favorably view the school, and increase the satisfaction of those that view the school unfavorably.

Regarding the factors, school administrators should consider directing staff and budget resources so that parents' involvement in their children's education and communication with parents about their children's academic progress are increased. The adequacy of school resources such as the library and school computers can be monitored to a greater extent. The accessibility, responsiveness, and budget management of school administrators themselves can be ascertained in the effort to improve parent satisfaction, and ultimately, school effectiveness. School administrators need to measure these factors and take actions that increase parent satisfaction.

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