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# Satisficing: A Decision-Making Strategy For School Choice

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SATISFICING: A DECISION-MAKING STRATEGY FOR SCHOOL CHOICE?

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate parent decision-making regarding school choice. Data were collected through a survey on how parents approached the decision making task of choosing a school for their child. Parents of kindergarten and first grade students in one public school district in Minnesota and five private schools in surrounding communities were invited to participate.

Four bodies of literature provide the theoretical basis of the study. They are education reform; school choice in Minnesota; factors parents consider when choosing schools; and decision-making theory.

Satisficing, a concept drawn from Herbert Simon's (1955, 1956) theory of bounded rationality became a key variable in the study. The Maximization Scale short (Nenkov, Morrin, Ward, Schwartz, & Hulland, 2008) was used to identify individuals who maximize, or continually look for the absolute best options in decision-making. Satisficers, in contrast, accept the first best option.

The first research question addressed the relationship between the decision-making process parents use to select a school for their children, and the choice they make regarding the school in which they enroll their student(s). Chi-square analysis found a significant difference ( $X^2 = 11.182, df = 4, p < .02$ ) between maximizers and satisficers in regard to the number of schools parents considered before choosing a school. However, there was no significant difference between maximizers and

satisficers in the rates at which they enroll their children in schools outside of neighborhood schools. While maximizers considered more school options, these considerations did not translate into leaving the neighborhood school.

The second research question examined whether or not there was a difference between parents of first grade students classified as satisficers and those classified as maximizers when asked how satisfied they were with their children's kindergarten. The Chi Square analysis found no statistically significant difference; the satisfaction rates were similar for both maximizers and satisficers. Ninety-one percent ( $n = 40$ ) of first grade students attended the same school for first grade as they did for kindergarten. (decision-making, Maximization Scale, satisficing)

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In Minnesota, an array of educational opportunities exists for children. Inter-district and intra-district transfer has allowed K-12 students the option of applying to attend schools outside their neighborhood school. Many districts have developed magnet schools centering either on a particular curriculum such as the Montessori method of education, or a particular subject area such as fine arts. In 1988, Governor Rudy Perpich signed Minnesota's Post-Secondary Enrollment Options Act (PSEO) which has allowed high school juniors and seniors the opportunity to enroll in college courses at state expense for college credit (Funkhouser & Colopy, 1994). Moreover, Minnesota has been a leader in the charter school movement since the first charter school opened in 1991. At the time of this report, a proliferation of virtual schools provided additional options for Minnesota students. Other alternatives have included home-schools and non-public religious and secular schools.

Minnesota's K-12 education finance system has been funding public schools on a per pupil basis. Should a student leave a district, the result is a net loss for the home district in per pupil revenue. This effectively means schools and districts are in competition for students (Institute on Race and Poverty, 2008). To secure more per pupil revenue, districts and schools have been forced to become more effective and innovative in keeping or attracting students (West, 1989).

School choice is seen as a panacea to problems in our education system (Chubb & Moe, 1988, 1990). School choice may well ensure access for all students to quality schools and improve student achievement. Schneider, Teske, and Marschall (2000) concluded choice options may improve both student achievement and the quality of education in the United States. Competition created through choice may improve schools.

School choice has been an important area of research. A significant body of research has discussed who tends to exit their neighborhood school and why (Bomotti, 1996; Darling-Hammond & Kirby, 1985; ERS Education Digest, 1990; Fossey, 1994; Goldring & Bauch, 1995; Goldring & Hausman, 1999; Goldring & Rowley, 2006; Weiher & Tedin, 2002; Witte, 1996). Emerging from this literature are several factors parents identify as impacting their decision on where to send their children to school. Factors include class size; test scores; proximity to parent's work, daycare provider, or home; unique programs; enrichment classes; teacher or school reputation; word of mouth; composition of the student body; and attractiveness of school grounds.

There has been limited research, however, on the decision-making process individual parents employ when choosing a school for their child. Proponents of school choice assume parents would naturally choose high quality schools over poorer performing schools and would engage in active searches to obtain information about options before making a schooling choice for their children. However, Buckley and Schneider (2007) noted that as school choice options multiply, decision-making becomes more complex. It becomes increasingly difficult for individuals to gather and evaluate information about the array of school options available. Also, some parents

do not seek out information, defaulting to the neighborhood school irrespective of its quality.

Even if parents gather information about their school choice options, parents may make choices contrary to their stated preferences (Weiher & Tedin, 2002). For example, parents may identify test scores as the priority consideration for school choice, but subsequently enroll their child in a school with lower test scores than the school they were exiting. A decision such as this appears to counter assumptions about parent choice upon which school reform is based (Buckley & Schneider, 2007).

### Scope of the Study

This study examined school choice in a single, medium sized, urban Minnesota school district, and the private schools within the surrounding community. Data was collected by surveying parents of kindergarten or first grade students during the 2010-11 school year.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to discover how parents approach and employ decision-making processes when choosing a school for their kindergarten or first grade child. Choosing a school for one's child is an important decision. Rational choice theory is the traditional framework used to understand how individuals make decisions and provides the basis of traditional economic theories used to explain how school choice can reform education. Alternately, some contemporary theorists assert rational choice does not reflect the actual practice of decision-making by individuals. Herbert Simon's (1955, 1956) alternate explanation of decision-making introduced "bounded rationality" as a heuristic, or rule of thumb, that best explains decision-making



behavior. Simon argued that individuals, instead of making optimal decisions, “satisfice.” To satisfice means to pursue not the optimal course of action, but the first, good-enough option (Schwartz, 2004b).

The researcher examined the relationship of satisficing to decision-making to explain parents’ choice of schools for their children. In this study, contemporary explanations, applications, and measures of decision-making behavior based on satisficing were presented. Additionally, the researcher examined whether or not satisficing explains individual decision-making behavior in parents when they are choosing a school for their kindergarten or first grade child. Finally, the study addressed the question of whether individuals who employ a satisficing decision-making process are more satisfied with their choice of school than those who do not.

#### Statement of the Problem

What determines school choice? Buckley and Schneider (2007) found parents approach school choice with an array of preferences. Parents face the task of gathering information and sifting through it, defining preferences, and rating their importance before making their choice. Decision-making requires parents are well informed about their school choice options. Some parents do not seek out information about school choice because they do not understand they have options. Often, when parents actively attempt to seek out information, the information can be incomplete or incomprehensible (Buckley & Schneider, 2003, 2007; Cooper, 2005). Sometimes, the volume of information is so overwhelming that parents decide on a school without researching the options, selecting the neighborhood school by, what appears to be, default.

Additionally, a range of preferred outcomes enter into parents' decision-making about where to enroll their child. For example, parents state they hope to improve their child's future through their choice (Gonzales, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Ream, 2005). Even when parents agree that high test scores are important, the influence of those scores on a parent's choice remains ambiguous (Buckley & Schneider, 2007). Do better scores mean better teachers or a more rigorous curriculum (Buddin, Cordes, & Kirby, 1998; Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000; Schneider, Teske, Marschall, & Roch, 1997; Weiher & Tedin, 2002)? Moreover, what outcomes or consequences do parents expect from their choice (Buckley & Schneider, 2007; David, West, & Ribbens, 1994)? Do parents believe sending a child to a school boasting higher test scores will translate into better post-secondary options (a better college) for their student? Parents approach the decision-making task without understanding how their preferences translate into desired outcomes. It remains unclear how parents of kindergarten or first grade students approach decision-making about school choice under the conditions of uncertainty.

### Research Questions

This study was guided by two research questions. The first question examined the difference among parents who are "satisficers" and "maximizers" when they select schools for their children. Maximizing is a decision-making approach used by individuals, maximizers, who habitually look to optimize their choice (Schwartz, 2004b).

The second research question focused on outcomes of the parents' choice.

1. What is the relationship between the decision-making process parents use to select a school for their children, and the choice they make regarding the school in which they enroll their student(s)?
  - (a) Do maximizers and satisficers differ on the number of schools they consider when choosing a school for their child?
  - (b) Do maximizers and satisficers differ in the rates at which they enroll their children in schools outside their neighborhood schools?
2. What is the relationship between the decision-making process parents use to choose a school for their children and parental satisfaction with their choice of school; are satisficers more satisfied with their school choice than maximizers?

#### Significance of the Study

Research (Bomotti, 1996; Darling-Hammond & Kirby, 1985; ERS Education Digest, 1990; Fossey, 1994; Goldring & Bauch, 1995; Goldring & Hausman, 1999; Goldring & Rowley, 2006; Weiher & Tedin, 2002; Witte, 1996) has been conducted to identify what factors motivate parents to exercise their school choice option.

However, little research has focused on *how* parents choose schools for their children.

In one study, Buckley and Schneider (2007) examined the information seeking and decision-making processes parents used when choosing a charter school in

Washington, DC. In their study, parents used a computer search to identify and research schools of interest. The amount of time parents spent looking at a particular school was captured in real time.

What is missing in the literature is research into how individual decision-making, from the bounded rationality concept of satisficing, impacts the choice parents make in choosing their kindergarten or first grade child(ren)'s school. This study focused on parents as decision-makers from the perspective of bounded rationality.

Specifically, this study attempted to discover how parents approach and employ decision-making processes when choosing a school for their kindergarten or first grade child. Educational reform measures were enacted by the majority of states to ensure school choice would improve access to quality education leading to gains in student achievement. At the time of this report, the National Center on School Choice (NCSC, 2010) cited "47 states have some kind of open enrollment policy; all 50 have the school transfer option under No Child Left Behind, 9 states offer public or privately-funded vouchers, and 7 states offer tax credits" (para. 2). Moreover, much of school reform literature and public policy has been justified using an economic model that assumes individuals utilize a rational choice model when making decisions. Prior research (Buckley & Schneider, 2007; Weiher & Tedin, 2002) concluded parents often make enrollment decisions that conflict with their stated preferences. This runs contrary to assumptions rational choice theory makes about how consumers behave. In other words, parents may appear to act irrationally when selecting a school. However, "people making choices are intendedly rational. They want to make rational decisions but they cannot always do so" (Jones, 2001, p. 298). This suggests a weakness in rational choice theory's ability to explain school choice through the market mechanisms of supply and demand.

There are alternate decision-making models. Herbert Simon's (1955) theory of "bounded rationality" may better explain a parent's choice of school. Important to Simon's theory is the concept of "satisficing." Rational choice theory does not appear to reflect a parent's actual decision-making process concerning school choice. Bounded rationality, in general, and satisficing, specifically, might lead to a better understanding of the process parents undertake when choosing schools for their children.

Ultimately, this study's value lies in its ability to help schools and school districts understand processes involved in parent choice of schools for their children, thereby aiding in the recruitment and enrollment of students. This study may have policy implications for federal, state, and local policy-makers designing school choice options. Findings may be of interest to schools and school districts which find themselves in competition with one another for students and the public dollars attached to them.

#### Definition of Terms and Acronyms

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE, 2008) defines Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as a "means of measuring, through standards and assessments, the achievement of NCLB" (No Child Left Behind's goal; para. 1).

Bounded Rationality: A model to explain human decision-making behavior, it was developed as a response to rational choice theory (Jones, 2001).

Charter school: The Minnesota Association of Charter Schools (n.d.b) has defined charter schools as ". . . tuition free independent public schools that are open to

and welcome all students, no matter ability or need, and are governed and operated jointly by licensed teachers, parents and community members” (para. 2).

Homeschooling: Educating children at home instead of in a public or private school (Basham, 2001).

Magnet program: An optional program existing within a public school.

Magnet school: A public school offering a specialized curriculum drawing a student body which represents the demographics of the community (Archbold, 2004).

Maximizers: Individuals who habitually look to optimize their choice (Schwartz, 2004b).

Neighborhood school: A school to which a child is assigned and usually proximate to (in the neighborhood of) the child’s residence.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): “The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 [NCLB] reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) – the main federal law affecting education from kindergarten through high school. NCLB is built on four principles: accountability for results, more choices for parents, greater local control and flexibility, and an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, para. 1).

Non-public school: In the United States, a school not supported by public funds, which may or may not have a religious affiliation.

Private school: A school which operates without public funding. In this study, the term private school is used to differentiate it from a non-public home school setting or virtual education setting since instruction in a “private school” is provided on-site within a school district, rather than in a home or office type setting.

Public policy: “Public policy is whatever government chooses to do or not to do” (Dye, 2001, p. 2).

Open enrollment: An application process Minnesota uses which allows students to enroll in a public school of the parents’ choosing across districts statewide (West, 1989).

Parochial school: In this study, a parochial school is defined as a Christian K-12 school.

Post-secondary enrollment option (PSEO): A program for Minnesota students where students in grades eleven and twelve who meet specific academic qualifications may enroll in a Minnesota college or university for credit at state expense.

Public school: A school for students in kindergarten through Grade 12 supported by public funds and providing free education for all children.

Rational choice theory: A theory of decision-making used in social sciences to explain individual (consumer) choice.

Satisficers: Individuals who select the first “good-enough” alternative irrespective of the existence of a better alternative (Schwartz, 2004b).

Satisficing: In decision-making theory, it refers to pursuing not the optimal course, but the first, good-enough option (Schwartz, 2004b).

School choice: Broadly defined, school choice is a mechanism that allows parents to choose the school their child will attend. State policy may allow different types of choice.

Vouchers: Certificates issued by a government or private entity to allow a student to enroll in a private school without the burden of some or all tuition costs.

## Delimitations

The results of this study may be limited by the following considerations.

1. Minnesota has unique choice options not found in all states.
2. Participants were selected from a single school district. This district has a limited array of choice options available. Many districts, like this one, have limited public or private school choice options for students.
3. Some students may be placed in a particular public school through some default function which does not allow parents to select an alternative. For example, a student who registers late may have limited public school options due to enrollment caps.
4. Parental decision-making may operate differently at various points in a student's academic life. The results from this study may not transfer to parental decision-making at the middle school or high school level.
5. While virtual and home school choice options exist, data was not collected on individuals who ultimately enroll their student in one of these options.

## Organization of the Study

Chapter II includes a literature review of school choice in Minnesota, and the factors influencing parents when choosing a school. Parents become consumers in the education marketplace when deciding upon a school for their child. Chapter II presents a broad introduction to the literature on decision-making in a rational choice model. Chapter II concludes with an overview of the literature on bounded rationality,



a contemporary departure from the rational choice model. Satisficing, a core concept in bounded rationality, is discussed as well.

Chapter III outlines the research design. Chapter IV presents the data and its analysis. Chapter V presents a summary and discussion of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations to researchers and state, district, and local policymakers.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

Four bodies of literature provided the theoretical basis for this study. The first is education reform which was a public policy challenge at the time of this report. School choice has been touted as a critical component in reforming education. Each state has taken a unique stance and approach to school choice. The second body of literature describes school choice options available to Minnesota parents at the time of this study. Minnesota was among the first states to enact legislation expanding school choice options for Minnesota students. Next, many studies have been done to isolate factors influencing parental choice. These factors translate into preferences parents identify when considering schools. Finally, central to this study is decision-making theory. Rational choice theory has been used by social scientists, primarily in economics and political science, to explain individual decision-making. Critics of this approach assert rational choice decision-making theory does not reflect how individuals actually make decisions.

#### Education Reform

“Universal education is a cornerstone of democracy” (Churchill, 1918, p. 159). In a 1997 speech to the National Press Club, former U.S. Secretary of Education, Richard W. Riley, linked a quality system of public education to political and

economic freedom. In his speech, Riley stated, "Quality public schools are the foundation of a democracy and a free enterprise economic system. The public school concept is fundamentally American" (as cited in U.S. Department of Education, 1997, p. 1). It is in America's national interest to have a well educated citizenry. Under Article 8, Section 1 of Minnesota's Constitution, "The stability of a republican form of government depending mainly upon the intelligence of the people, it shall be the duty of the Legislature to establish a general and uniform system of public schools" (Minnesota Historical Society, 2011, p. 21). "Most of the fifty U.S. states have a provision in their state constitution for free, public education" (Riley as cited in U.S. Department of Education, 1997, p. 1). These statutes are currently interpreted as "a commitment to the ideal that all children, regardless of their academic readiness, race, socioeconomic status, language proficiency, or special education needs, have equal access to a quality K-12 education" (Riley as cited in U.S. Department of Education, 1997, p. 1).

Though the United States Constitution leaves states responsible for the education of their youth, the federal government has played an ever increasing role in guaranteeing the quality of education for all its citizens. In fact, the United States has pursued educational initiatives and reforms tied to advancing its national interest, especially since World War II (WWII; Gilpin, 1986; Levin, 2001).

The United States emerged from WWII the undisputed hegemonic world power (Gilpin, 1986; Levin, 2001; Wallerstein, 2003). A decade later, the United States fell behind in the space race when the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik*, the first man-made object to circle the earth (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). This led to

an outcry that the United States was falling behind the Soviet Union in technological advancement and a professed fear that the pool of United States scientists was dwindling while that of the Soviet Union was increasing. Altering this imbalance was seen as necessary for United States military, economic, and political supremacy. Public policy to aid scientific research resulted in the 1958 National Defense Education Act which provided grants to universities and loans to students studying in the sciences (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The 1965 Elementary and Secondary School Act targeted the education deficits of poor children in the United States in that it addressed issues of access to and equity in education (Vergari, 2007).

The publication, *A Nation at Risk* (Gardner et al., 1983) raised again national concern over the quality of education in the United States. A report by the National Science Board (1999) echoed a concern for the national interest “as American schools fail more youngsters, this nation’s capability to innovate, solve problems, and produce — to sustain world leadership — is in jeopardy” (p. 3).

On January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. Formerly known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, NCLB has required states to hold all schools accountable and to monitor student adequate yearly progress (AYP) through comprehensive testing. Failure of a school to meet AYP goals results in a graduated series of consequences and ultimately the withholding of federal funds from the school until AYP goals are addressed. Schools in which students fail to meet annual benchmarks are deemed “in need of improvement” and enter into a phase of corrective action. Subsequent failures

lead to the ultimate consequence of state takeover (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

As a public policy, NCLB is controversial. The legislation, which received bipartisan support, promised that every child in grades three to eight would be tested each year; states would be responsible for testing and designing reforms; poorly performing schools would get help; and, students in poorly performing schools could transfer to other schools (Ravitch, 2010). Educators and state officials assert the measure costs too much to implement, lacks congressional funding support, conflicts with state testing programs, and creates inflexible demands on struggling schools (Brown, 2005).

Under NCLB, should a school fail to meet AYP targets two consecutive years, the school must offer eligible children the chance to transfer to higher-performing local schools at the district's expense (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The logic behind the NCLB choice provision rests on free market theory.

In a free market, the exchange of goods and services is dictated by the supply of and the demand for a specific good or service. The market operates efficiently because, ideally, supply will meet demand. Government involvement in the free market interrupts the free flow of goods and services and compromises the economic marketplace's efficiency (Chubb & Moe, 1988). By extension, since public schools in the United States are operated by the government, free market principles are not allowed to operate, and public education is inefficient. Over time, inefficiencies in public education have lead to underperforming schools and poor student achievement (Buckley & Schneider, 2007).

Choice creates competition among schools for students (Hanushek, 2006; Buckley & Schneider, 2007). Since schools and districts depend on students for their continued operation, the competition for students will, theoretically, improve school quality. In theory, parents would remove their children from poorly performing schools (Institute on Race & Poverty, 2008). “Successful schools will be popular. Weaker schools will be unpopular, progressively losing their *per capita* funding until they either improve or close. Over time, therefore, the general standard of schools will be higher” (Gorard, Taylor, & Fitz, 2003, p. 15). In theory, with the enhanced ability to exit poorly performing schools, parents will create a demand for better schools (Institute on Race & Poverty, 2008).

Up until the 1990s, parents were traditionally afforded little choice in where they sent their child to school. The ability to exit poorly performing public schools has always existed for the affluent (Darling-Hammond & Kirby, 1985; Tice, Chapman, Princiotta, & Bielick, 2006). By choosing a neighborhood in which to live based on the quality of schools, affluent parents effectively exercise choice. Additionally, they also have the means to exit public schools by enrolling their children in private schools (Fuller & Elmore, 1996; Goldring & Hausman, 1999; Gutmann, 2003).

Under NCLB, the demand for quality schools, coupled with state and federal monetary incentives fueled the fledgling charter school movement which began in the 1990s. The Minnesota Association of Charter Schools (n.d.b) has defined charter schools as “. . . tuition free independent public schools that are open to and welcome all students, no matter ability or need, and are governed and operated jointly by

licensed teachers, parents and community members” (para. 2). What sets charter schools apart from regular public schools is their ability to shed some of the demands and restrictions states place on traditional public schools. The charter school enters into a detailed agreement with a state on how to manage or operate the school then drafts a charter or agreement with a state detailing how the school plans to meet state requirements and report educational results. If the plan is accepted by the state, then a charter is issued for a fixed term which is generally between three and five years. Charter schools may be exempt from some state regulations that typically apply to the management and operation of public schools (Buckley & Schneider, 2007). According to the U. S. Department of Education (2004), charter schools can "adopt any instructional practice that will help achieve their missions" (p. 1). They are accountable for improving student achievement which appeals to those who call for educational reform.

As public schools, charter schools are tuition-free and provide parents a schooling alternative. Since they are publically funded, charter schools provide parents with one more choice for educating students, irrespective of affluence. Traditionally underserved populations, who have been stuck in underperforming schools, view charters as an escape from further marginalization. Charter schools have been created by diverse groups who design schools which reflect their unique interests, values, or culture. The popularity of charter schools with parents may translate into more parent involvement which can help boost student achievement (Borsuk, 2009; Buckley & Schneider, 2007). For example, a Hmong charter school formed in St. Paul, Minnesota, when parents and school founders became concerned

“that they were losing their youth to gangs and other destructive behavior as the young people moved away from Hmong influences” (Borsuk, 2009, para. 20). Other groups, such as right-wing Christians (Huerta, 2000), Hebrew language proponents (Medina, 2010), and Afrocentrists (Yancy, 2000) have formed charter schools for cultural and value driven reasons. These examples illustrate the breadth of charter schools’ appeal.

Critics express concern both about how regular, traditional public schools will be affected by charter schools and the absence of regulation in charter schools for ensuring quality. One fear is children from upper income groups will take advantage of charter schools and leave regular public schools with high concentrations of students in poverty. The quality of regular public schools will suffer (Henig, 1994; Smith & Meier, 1995). The other concern reflects the difficulty holding charter schools accountable when state supervision is often lax (Wells, 2002). Poor reporting of student performance makes the educational effectiveness of charter schools difficult to measure (Henig, 1994).

Charter schools, where available, provide parents the opportunity to choose alternative public schools for their children. School choice allows parents to become consumers; consumers have preferences (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000). Parents can choose schools that match their preferences. Choice in and of itself alters the education marketplace and allows for education reform (Chubb & Moe, 1988).

No choice provision is more controversial than school vouchers. Milton Friedman (1982), a renowned economist and Nobel Prize recipient, was an early advocate of school choice. As early as 1955, Friedman advanced the idea of privatizing K-12 education. Vouchers, he believed, provide the vehicle toward this



end and would provide all students the opportunity to attend private schools using public dollars. Vouchers remain a fixture in the current policy debates on education reform.

Former Education Secretary, Richard Riley, argued against vouchers as a means of reform for the American education system. He believed vouchers would “divert attention from the need to improve the public schools . . . add to the public cost of education . . . reduce accountability . . . force private and parochial schools to become less private and less parochial . . . possibly violate State and U.S. Constitutions” (as cited in U.S. Department of Education, 1997, p. 2). Riley argued for continued reform through other efforts in lieu of vouchers.

Expanded choice in public schools through magnet schools and charter schools, coupled with a focus on the basics, increased parent involvement, improved teaching, and high standards for achievement and discipline, can do far more to improve the education of all children than private school vouchers for a few. The purpose of any school improvement idea should be to invite effective innovation in more schools, particularly those schools that are lagging behind (as cited in U.S. Department of Education, 1997, p. 2).

Riley has not been alone in his assessment that vouchers might compromise the quality of public schools. Vouchers represent, to many, the privatization of K-12 education which runs counter to society’s belief in the importance of public schools. Critics of vouchers forecast an erosion of the quality of American schools (Henig,

1994; Smith & Meier, 1995). So, while the free market may be efficient, it can operate at the expense of equality.

On the other hand, advocates assert vouchers have the potential to positively impact the quality of schools and student achievement (Chubb & Moe, 1988). Vouchers might provide poor students the opportunity to attend private schools they otherwise could not afford.

Vouchers remain alive in the public policy arena. Voucher programs can be enacted either through state legislation or through referendum. In 2000, voters in Michigan and California turned down ballot questions allowing vouchers (Miller, 2000). They expressed concern that vouchers would be used to fund religious schools in clear violation of the separation of church and state.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Cleveland, Ohio, instituted voucher systems specifically targeting low income students in the city's worst schools (Witte, 1996). Both systems survived legal challenges because tax dollars do not flow directly to schools but rather to families. Voucher proponents can point to other legal victories which seemingly open the door for the expansion of voucher systems.

Ken Kusner (2011) of the Associated Press reported Indiana, Republican Governor Mitch Daniels signed a bill in May 2011 allowing for a voucher program. This program has allowed parents to use vouchers to attend accredited non-public and parochial schools. The law was challenged citing the law violated state funding of religious institutions and a temporary injunction was sought.

According to Kusner (2011), Superior Court Judge Michael Keele denied the injunction and stated that the law establishing vouchers "is religion-neutral and was

enacted ‘for the benefit’ of students, not religious institutions or activities” (para. 3). Tom Coyne of the Associated Press subsequently reported that 70% of the 3,200 students utilizing vouchers have been attending Catholic schools (Coyne, 2011).

Proponents of vouchers and charter schools argue choice options will improve both student achievement and the quality of education in the United States (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000). School choice is seen as necessary to increase the quality of education in the United States. Choice addresses issues of both education quality and access. Moreover, school choice is seen as the answer to ensure equity in both access to educational opportunities and student outcomes through the market forces of supply and demand.

Charter schools and other options for parent choice represent a compromise between voucher proponents and critics. Intradistrict choice, such as magnet schools or open enrollment programs, allows schools to retain public dollars while improving student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). Competition remains between schools to raise quality and improve access. If public schools fail to improve, parents will choose private options taking dollars from the public school systems. Funkhouser and Colopy (1994) concluded it is unclear whether or not school improvement has been driven by parents demanding better schools and exiting underperforming ones. It is possible schools would have improved for reasons unrelated to parents exiting the school, through change in school leadership or improved curriculum and instruction.

Some contend school choice promises to improve access to historically underserved populations. Archbald (2004) challenged the assertion that school choice

produces a “liberating effect” for low-income families. Public policy to address segregation “...assumes that schools of choice are made accessible to all families and that the choices are supported with public transportation and information about school options ...” (Archbald, 2004, p. 285). His argument echoes others (Schneider et al., 2000) in advocating for “controlled choice” targeting the specific goals of reducing economic and racial segregation.

School choice takes many forms including the creation of charter schools, open enrollment policies, and voucher plans. Reform is driven by a fear that America is being eclipsed economically by other nations in the expanding global marketplace. School reform has focused on moving away from a one-size-fits-all delivery model of public education to one which is driven by and sensitive to market forces. The market mechanisms of supply and demand force schools to compete for students whose parents want quality schools. Policy makers have enacted school choice legislation on a market model which is claimed to respond to parent demand for quality schools and improve access for all to schools of choice. School choice has continued to hold a prominent place in political discourse at the federal, state, and local levels.

#### School Choice in Minnesota

Minnesota has a long history of supporting school choice for K-12 students. Therefore, most parents in Minnesota are presented with many public options to consider before deciding where they will send their children to school. According to a 2011 legislative report, “...enrollment figures for K-12 students in Minnesota shows 821,823 attend public schools, 77,122 attend private schools, and 17,056 attend homeschools” (Minnesota House of Representatives, House Research, 2011).

### *Tax Credits*

Minnesota supports school choice through tax deductions and tax credits to parents. Early opponents claimed these tax cuts were unconstitutional. A study by the Rand Corporation found “Minnesota’s tax deduction (upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1983) was the first state policy subsidizing private school tuition costs to pass judicial review through all levels of the court system” (Darling-Hammond & Kirby, 1985, pp. v-vi).

According to the Minnesota Department of Revenue (n.d.), “Minnesota has two programs for families with children in kindergarten through 12th grade: the K-12 Education Subtraction, and the K-12 Education Credit” (para. 1). For both programs, household income and actual qualified expenses determine the amount of the credit. Tuition paid to non-public school is not considered an actual qualified expense. These tax credits have continued up to the time of this study for qualified families.

### *Charter Schools*

Charter schools have existed in Minnesota since 1992 when the state opened the nation’s first charter schools. The Minnesota Department of Education (2011a) has defined charter schools as “independent public schools of choice for parents and students” (para. 1). Since charter schools are public schools, they charge no tuition and are required to accept students of all abilities (MN Association of Charter Schools, n.d.b). According to the MN Association of Charter Schools, 35,000 students attended charter schools during the 2009-2010 school year (MN Association of Charter Schools, n.d.a).

Charter schools have had mixed success improving student achievement in Minnesota. The Institute on Race and Poverty (2008) reported “Advocates of charter schools promised that charter schools would extend the same school choice to low income parents and parents of color, who were stranded in low-performing traditional public schools” (p. 1). However, they concluded, “Although a few charter schools perform well, most offer low income parents and parents of color an inferior choice – a choice between low-performing traditional public schools and charter schools that perform even worse” (p. 1).

### *Open Enrollment*

Minnesota's public school students can apply to attend a public school outside their district or neighborhood school. Through inter-district and intra-district open enrollment, students have access to different course and curriculum offerings. Funkhouser and Colopy (1994) examined Minnesota's Open Enrollment Program in 1990-91 with the intention of assessing the free market assumptions advanced as part of education reform. Their findings were mixed. Some districts, which lost students to open enrollment, were motivated to improve their schools. Other districts made improvements without being motivated by exiting students. It was unclear whether or not school improvement was driven by parents demanding better schools and/or students exiting poor ones.

While no tuition is charged when students choose schools outside their attendance area, transportation has not been typically provided. During the 2009-2010 school year, the Minnesota Department of Education (2011e) reported, “30,000 Minnesota students participated in open enrollment last year” (para. 1).

Transportation is another formidable barrier and limits students' access to schools of their choice.

### *The Choice is Yours Program*

The *Choice is Yours* program is peculiar to the Minneapolis School District. The program targets low income families who qualify for free or reduced-price school lunch and live in Minneapolis. The literature (Archbold, 2004; Schneider et al., 2000) refers to programs such as this as "controlled-choice" policy because of its purposeful aim at reducing segregation and inequalities. Under the program, families can apply to any Minneapolis school, including magnet schools, or select suburban schools having programs matching a child's preferences. If families apply by the program's annual deadline, January 15<sup>th</sup> at the time of this report, they receive priority placement at the schools they choose.

The *Choice is Yours* program addresses the transportation barrier so parents can choose from a larger selection of schools. The State of Minnesota covers the cost of transportation in the case of inter-district enrollment. Minneapolis Public Schools provide transportation for intra-district enrollment. While this program intentionally addresses inequities in educational opportunities, and provides transportation to qualifying students, parents still need to seek out information on choice options (Minnesota Department of Education, 2011f). The Institute on Race and Poverty (2008) reported "...programs such as The *Choice is Yours* program offer access to much better schools" (p. 1).

### *Magnet Schools and Magnet Programs*

A Magnet Program is an optional program which exists within a public school. These are often organized around specific curriculum areas such as language immersion or STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields of study. Magnet Schools are public schools offered by a district or consortium of districts which attract students because of the unique programs or opportunities they offer. In Minnesota, districts such as Moorhead have created magnet programs and schools in response to parent demand lest they risk losing students to one of the many charters or private schools (L. Kovash, personal communication, May 17, 2011). This illustrates and supports the belief that market forces will force school districts to respond to parent demands.

The availability of magnet schools can reduce inequities in educational opportunities and aid in desegregation. Parents apply to magnet schools, which if oversubscribed, institute a lottery system designed to balance categories such as race, class, and, gender. According to the Minnesota Department of Education (2011c),

Minnesota currently has more than 100 magnet schools in 22 school districts and students are encouraged to apply based on interest in a particular theme or curricular offering. The following themes are presently being offered in Minnesota Magnet Schools: Environmental Studies; Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM); Career and Technical Education; Fine Arts; World Cultures; Montessori; International Baccalaureate; and Language Immersion.” (para. 2)



### *Home Schooling*

The Minnesota Department of Education (2011b) has reported “approximately 15,000 Minnesota students are schooled at home by their parents” (p. 1).

Homeschools operate much like private schools and must provide students with curriculum required by state statutes. Public dollars are not used to support home schooled children. Parents are responsible for selecting curriculum, providing instruction, issuing diplomas, and providing transcripts. The local school district monitors whether children are meeting Minnesota’s Compulsory Instruction requirements.

### *Post Secondary Enrollment Option (PSEO)*

Minnesota offers eligible high school juniors and seniors the opportunity to enroll in Minnesota colleges and universities at state expense. Some participating higher education institutions are private which means public dollars are shifted from K-12 public education to the higher education system. West (1989), a proponent of vouchers, identified this program as a form of voucher which transfers public dollars out of schools to colleges, some of which are private. He used the PSEO program as an example to support his argument that programs already exist which move taxpayer dollars out of public schools. From PSEO, it is a short leap for the state to contemplate vouchers since they both create competition for students.

### *Virtual Schools*

Sometimes referred to as cyber charters, virtual schools provide Minnesota students with the option of attending public school from home. Some Intermediate School districts and school district collaboratives develop on-line learning courses

allowing students the option of completing all or most of their course work outside the traditional classroom. The Minnesota Department of Education (2011d) has stated the following on their web site in regard to online courses.

“All online courses offered through certified programs are:

- Taught by Minnesota licensed teachers.
- Meet or exceed state academic standards.
- Transfer to other public school districts.
- Apply to high school graduation.” (para. 2)

“For profit” providers of online degrees are also allowed to provide curriculum so long as their courses meet minimum state requirements.

#### *Private Schools*

Private schools have historically provided school choice options to the affluent. Private schools provide parents, willing and able to pay tuition, access to schools not supported by public dollars. Private schools can be secular or parochial. Private schools are joined by private tutors, private online schools, and home schools as Minnesota’s non-public school options.

#### *Vouchers*

West (1989) argued Minnesota’s various choice provisions effectively operate like a voucher system. Tuition credits and PSEOs use public dollars to cover education costs in the private sector. The Omnibus Education Finance Bill (H.F. 934, 2011) introduced by Minnesota’s House of Representatives included a public voucher provision for districts of the First Class. Cities with that distinction are St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Duluth. This bill did not pass.

Minnesota facilitates school choice through a number of avenues. The purpose of this section was to outline the various school choice options, not to examine their effectiveness. Choice is aimed at allowing parents to choose from a variety of schools appealing to the desires and needs of parents and students. It is unclear how parents receive information about their options. While plentiful for parents in metropolitan areas; school options are restricted in greater Minnesota. Even when options exist, and parents have information about school choice, access is often a problem with transportation a formidable barrier.

### Factors Parents Consider When Choosing Schools

Studies on school choice reveal many factors parents consider when choosing schools for their child(ren). This section identifies factors that influence the choice parents make when selecting a school for their child(ren). These factors represent parent preferences which influence decision-making.

Parents choose one school over another because they have preferences. It is difficult to account for differences in preferences held by parents. For example, some research attributes part of the differences of parent preference to race (Schneider, Teske, & Marschall, 2000; Weiher & Tedin, 2002). Other studies find parent preference largely the same across race and class with academic quality and class size fundamentally important (Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000).

Parents cite a myriad of preferences (factors) they consider when selecting a school for their child. In a study by Weiher and Tedin (2002), parents were asked to identify “the most important consideration in making their school choices from a list of six factors – test scores, discipline, school racial or ethnic characteristics, location,

the teaching of moral values, and safety” (p. 82). Parents considered each of these six factors to be important considerations. Goldring and Rowley (2006) reported on a number of studies showing parents select private schools for curricular rigor, discipline, and safety. A 1990 report presented to the Minnesota House of Representatives cited academics as lagging behind convenience and geography as stated reasons for enrollment choice (ERS Education Digest, 1990).

Class size has been cited as one contributing factor as to why parents decide to choose a particular school (Kleitz, Weiher, Tedin, & Matland, 2000). Large class size often drives parents to look for schools with better student-teacher ratios. Kleitz et al. found parents choose charter schools because of smaller class sizes which they perceive as linked to the quality of education.

Some parents consider test scores important. Using test scores to gauge school quality is problematic since they are simplistic measures of academic quality. Weiher and Tedin (2002) acknowledged, “this measure probably oversimplifies the way that parents actually think about school quality” (p. 82). The National Center of Education Statistics (Tice et al., 2006), reported educational quality appeared to be a factor affecting parent decisions to participate in choice programs. This was found to be true across ethnicity with 99% of Anglo, 98% of Hispanic, and 96% of African-American parents citing quality a factor in their decision to enroll their children in schools outside their assigned school in their district (Tice et al., 2006).

In the National Center of Education Statistics report, *Trends in the Use of School Choice* (Tice et al., 2006), location was cited as an important factor affecting parent decisions to participate in choice programs rather than leave their children

enrolled in assigned public schools in their district. This was found to be true across ethnicity; however, 55% of Anglo parents found it important while 75% of both Hispanic and African-American parents did (Tice et al., 2006).

Teacher attributes may also enter into parent decisions. Some parents have strong preferences about the kind of teacher they want. Jacob and Lefgren (2007) found when requesting teachers, parents strongly prefer teachers whose students hold them in high regard. However, parents with children enrolled in schools with high numbers of students living in poverty and high concentrations of minorities prefer teachers who are effective in increasing student achievement.

Hamilton and Guin (2006) found school demographics have a significant impact on parental choice. Weiher and Tedin (2002) surveyed parents from a Texas charter school. Their research population included parents of students that were black or white. Also included were parents of students who left traditional public schools, both at-risk and not-at-risk for poor student achievement. Weiher and Tedin stated, “no group of parents says that it is important to them that their children attend schools with children who are predominantly of the same racial or ethnic group” (p. 82).

In sum, it is difficult to generalize about parents preferences when considering school choice options. Important factors include: class size, test scores, location, curriculum, teacher or school reputation, or word of mouth.

### Decision-Making Theory

Decision-making is a cognitive process individuals use to select one alternative or scenario over another. The essence of rational choice theory is captured by social scientist, Jon Elster (1989), “When faced with several courses of action, people

usually do what they believe is likely to have the best overall outcome” (p. 22). If school choice options exist, parents gain the opportunity to purposefully choose, from an array of alternatives, the best school for their child. The best school would be the one to provide the maximum benefit. Bounded rationality, an alternative theory credited to Herbert Simon (1947, 1955, 1956, 1976, 1992), fundamentally departs from rational choice theory. According to rational choice theory, individuals are said to maximize, while under conditions of bounded rationality, individuals are said to satisfice.

### *Rational Choice Theory*

Rational choice theory is an established paradigm used in the social sciences, particularly economics and political science to understand individual behavior (Jones, 1999, 2001). The theory relies on certain assumptions about how people make decisions. It is expected people make choices based on a process of identifying their preferences. They then begin evaluating those preferences by weighing the costs against the benefits, eventually selecting the preference(s) to maximize their self interest. To select based on one’s self interest is said to be acting rationally, otherwise one is acting non-rationally. Smith and Larimer (2009) said of actors, which includes in this case, parents, "First and foremost, policy actors are not fully rational. They do not make decisions with complete information, nor do they weigh the pros and cons of all possible alternatives prior to making a decision" (p. 118).

School reform policy is built upon the assumption parents want good schools and act rationally by selecting the optimal one for their children. Schools need students attending them in order to exist, so they need to provide what parents prefer.

So, parents say they want good schools; the marketplace provides them; and, as rational consumers, parents select the schools they say they want. Furthermore, rational choice theory assumes supply and demand will best ensure people have access to what they want because the market will respond by providing it through competition among schools. In the context of education reform, parents want access to good schools and the marketplace will respond by providing them. Consistent with rational choice theory, parents would be the consumers who act rationally and select the best school. This is problematic since the best school for one parent may not be the best for another.

When faced with a choice, decision makers first ask the question: What do I want (Schwartz, 2004)? Individuals have preferences which they can identify. In the context of school choice, education reform policy is built on the assumption of parents as consumers. Smith and Meier (1995), rejected this assumption. They believe that school choice reforms built around the market paradigm of supply and demand takes for granted that all parents will become knowledgeable, informed consumers in education marketplace. Additionally, parents are not likely to choose a school based on a extensive cost-benefit analysis.

While parents may not intentionally undertake an elaborate cost-benefit analysis, they do have preferences. So when parents are faced with a choice about where to send their child to school, ideally they would be able to identify and articulate their preferences. For example, parents might prefer a private school to a public one. They could prefer a school which offers Chinese over one that teaches Latin. Parents might offer up a smorgasbord of preferences which they hope to find in

a school. From a market perspective, the sellers (in this case, the schools) presumably supply what the consumers (in this case, the parents) demand. The implications for schools are they must provide parents with what they want or parents will choose another school.

How do parents choose schools? In other words, how do parent preferences translate into choice? Rational choice theorists advance the notion that people make the best choice they can under circumstances beyond their control; they choose under conditions of uncertainty. According to rational choice theory, individuals choose according to certain assumptions (Mas-Collel, Whinston, & Green, 1995). The first assumption is individuals are faced with a knowable set of alternatives from which to choose. This suggests parents know what is available. Additionally, individuals must choose one alternative over another. Since education is compulsory, where a choice of schools is available, parents must choose. Finally, individuals choose the most preferred alternative. Parents would examine their preferences. They would assess which was most important and use that as the basis for the selection of their child's school. Following the theory to its conclusion, parents would be rational in their choice.

Applying economic theory to the education marketplace is complicated. First, parents need to be aware there are options, or choices, available when selecting a school for their child. Second, parents need to understand their preferences. Finally, parents need to seek out information to make the optimal choice. Rational choice theory does not reflect typical decision-making behavior (Coleman & Farraro, 1992; Hatch, 1997). Rational choice theory requires a decision-maker to act like "Economic



Man", a hypothetical, dispassionate decision maker. Lambert (2006) summarized the central problem of rational choice theory:

Economic Man makes logical, rational, self-interested decisions that weigh costs against benefits and maximize value and profit to himself. Economic Man is an intelligent, analytic, selfish creature who has perfect self-regulation in pursuit of his future goals and is unswayed by bodily states and feelings. And Economic Man is a marvelously convenient pawn for building academic theories. But Economic Man has one fatal flaw: he does not exist. (p. 2)

### *Bounded Rationality*

Herbert Simon (1947, 1955, 1956, 1957) was among the first to question the assumptions of rational choice theory and introduced the notion of bounded rationality. Bounded rationality asserts individuals can make rational, but not necessarily optimal choices. Individuals are limited due to constraints of information, time, or processing capability. Simon (1955, 1956, 1957, 1972, 1976) explained the origins of decision-making theory can be found in traditional economic theory which assumes rational decision-making drives individual choice. This approach to understanding decision-making relies on complex mathematical algorithms to identify optimal, rational decisions. The usefulness of these algorithms came into question because people most likely cannot and do not calculate optimal outcomes in everyday decision-making. Individuals lack: (a) the time needed to gather all available information about each upcoming decision, (b) the capacity to process the information, and (c) the ability to calculate the consequences of their actions. While a rational decision-making approach is theoretically sound, it cannot and does not explain the

actual decision-making process people use. Instead, “bounded rationality” better describes individual decision-making.

Bounded rationality reconciles the difference between rational decision-making in theory and practice. Simon (1955, 1956, 1957) contended individuals set out to make rational decisions but lack the knowledge and skill to make optimal ones. He determined the following limits prevented people from carrying out rational decision-making:

1. Incomplete and imperfect information,
2. Complex problems,
3. Limited ability of individuals to process information,
4. Time constraints,
5. Competing preferences and goals.

These limitations prevent individuals, however well intentioned, from optimizing their choices.

Simon (1955) asked the reader to imagine a man selling his home. Under a rational choice decision-making model, the seller would be required to adopt a mathematical approach to determining probable costs and benefits of the myriad of choices the seller would be faced with during the selling process. This model requires computations beyond an individual’s ability and would be too labor intensive. Instead, bounded rationality better explained the seller’s behavior. Simon (1955), referring to the seller, argued:

Assume a price at which he can certainly sell and will be willing to sell in the  $n$ th time period. Second, he will set his initial acceptance price

quite high, watch the distribution of offers he receives, and gradually and approximately adjust his acceptance price downward or upward until he receives an offer he accepts - without ever making probability calculations. This, I submit, is the kind of rational adjustment that humans find “good enough” and are capable of exercising in a wide range of practical circumstances. (p. 117-118)

Simon’s “good enough” standard, key to bounded rationality, addresses the need for mechanisms to facilitate complex decision-making. This mechanism, “satisficing,” yields decision outcomes that are good enough to meet a decision maker’s desired goal. These decisions, while not optimal, are still rational (Simon, 1976). In short, satisficing is a heuristic, a rule of thumb, which considers the limits on time and intellectual capacity of a decision maker (Byron, 1998).

Satisficing requires a decision maker to set an “acceptable level or aspiration level as final criterion . . . simply taking the first acceptable move [option]” (Newell & Simon, 1972, p. 681). Satisficing, therefore, acts as a “stop rule” (Simon, 1979, p. 4). When an acceptable outcome is found, the decision maker chooses that outcome and stops looking for alternatives. The decision-making process ends. The satisficing rule can handle complex decision-making as well.

When the criterion of problem solution or action has more than one dimension, there is the matter of calculating the relative merits of several alternatives, one of which may be preferred along one dimension, another along another. The economist, unconcerned with the boundedness of rationality, solves the problem with the help of

marginalism, postulating some ratio at which the decision maker would trade off an increment of value on the one dimension against an increment of value on the other. The satisficing rule, which requires no such calculation of comparisons of marginal values along incommensurate dimensions, stipulates that search stops when a solution has been found that is good enough along *all* dimensions. Dynamically adjustable aspiration levels guarantee the termination of search without prior knowledge of how rich an environment is being explored. (Simon, 1979, p. 3)

Accepting satisficing as a decision-making heuristic allows flexibility in the decision-making process. Options are not static. According to Simon (1979), decision makers adjust “aspirations upward or downward in the face of benign or harsh circumstances, respectively” (p. 3). The decision maker is neither forced to search for an unrealistic, superior, optimal option nor precluded from settling for a seemingly inferior one. Contemporary theorists have extended and refined Simon’s original conceptualization of satisficing to better describe how decision-makers really behave in many decision-making environments (Bianchi, 1990; Byron, 1998; Schwartz, 2004; Schwartz, Ward, Monterosso, Lyubomirsky, White, & Lehman, 2002).

One might draw the conclusion that satisficing leads to poor, uninformed decisions. This is not necessarily the case. Redlawsk and Lau (2003) examined voting behavior and found:

“. . . where partisanship provides no guidance, voters who follow the prescriptions of rational information search – learning lots about the full range

of candidates – do a worse job of voting correctly than those who use intuitive strategies like satisficing. . . .” (Abstract, para. 1)

When comparing accuracy and speed, Gigerenzer and Goldstein (1996) found the simple take-the-best-option heuristic matched or bested an optimizing heuristic. Satisficing, then, produces satisfactory outcomes “requiring less time and less cognitive exertion” (Agosto, 2001, p. 9). Using a satisficing decision rule, in many instances, is highly logical and efficient behavior. Satisficing *is*, in fact, the maximizing strategy. So even if individuals do not look for the optimal choice, they can be acting rationally. In other words, the best people can do when making decisions, all things considered, is to satisfice (Schwartz, 2004a).

Barry Schwartz (2004a), in his book, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*, stated: “Choosing wisely begins with developing a clear understanding of your goals. And the first choice you must make is between the goal of choosing the absolute best and the goal of choosing something that is good enough” (p. 77). The type of decision-maker one is has an impact on the choices one makes. Those who choose the absolute best are maximizers and those who choose that which is good enough are satisficers.

Schwartz et al. (2002) developed a set of questions to determine whether individuals had the propensity to be maximizers or satisficers. This thirteen item instrument, The Maximization Scale, was administered to thousands of people with the following findings:

1. Maximizers engage in more product comparisons than satisficers, both before and after they make purchasing decisions.

2. Maximizers take longer than satisficers to decide on a purchase.
3. Maximizers spend more time than satisficers comparing their purchasing decisions to the decisions of others.
4. Maximizers are more likely to experience regret after a purchase.
5. Maximizers are more likely to spend time thinking about hypothetical alternatives to the purchases they've made.
6. Maximizers generally feel less positive about their purchasing decisions (Schwartz, 2004a, p. 83).

In short, maximizers may make better objective decisions than satisficers but not better subjective decisions (Schwartz, 2004a).

This distinction between objective satisfaction and subjective satisfaction is important. According to Schwartz (2004a), "When economists theorize about how consumers operate in the market, they assume that people seek to maximize their preferences or their satisfaction" (p. 88). This holds true in important life issues like choosing an educational institution. Current education reform measures are built around the assumption parents will maximize and select the optimal school for their child based on their preferences.

Education reform has long been on the public policy agenda in the United States. The solution commonly advanced to overhaul education is to allow and encourage school choice. School choice promises to introduce more competition into the education market. Reform is built on the assumption competition will improve the quality of schools and increase student achievement.

While private institutions and programs offer parents choice, tuition is a barrier to participation. Choice in public schools offer parents the ability to select a school based on their preference without incurring the tuition cost. Parents without the means to exit poor underperforming schools will have more publically funded options, such as charter schools. Options vary from state to state. Minnesota parents have many options.

While parents do not look for the same things in schools, they do demand schools which provide what they want. Since schools need students in order to remain open, they must be responsive to parents' preferences and supply the quality schools that parents demand. Expanded school choice allows parents to exit schools which do not deliver. A myriad of factors enter into a parent's decision when choosing a school for their child. These factors represent or translate into parent preferences.

Rational choice theory assumes individuals make decisions based upon complex calculations reflecting preferences and outcomes. Individuals do not always make optimal decisions. By extension, this means parents choosing a school for their child do not always make optimal decisions. So, rational choice theory may not best describe the way parents make decisions about school choice. Time constraints, lack of information, and/or the inability to comprehend options or outcomes get in the way of making decisions under the rational choice model. Bounded rationality takes into account human limitations regarding rational decision-making. Important to bounded rationality is satisficing, the tendency of a person to select the first "good enough" option when making a choice. Individuals who are satisficers select the first option that fits their minimum criteria of what is an acceptable choice instead of looking at

and evaluating all their options. They would use a “stop rule” in their selection. In short, parents would satisfice when choosing a school. They would choose the first school that adequately met their criteria for an acceptable school.



## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH METHODS

How do parents choose a school for their child? Two research questions guided this study and addressed this query. The first question examined the difference in how parents who are “satisficers” and “maximizers” selected schools for their children. The second question focused on the results of that choice.

1. What is the relationship between the decision-making process parents use to select a school for their children, and the choice they make regarding the school in which they enroll their student(s)?
  - (a) Do maximizers and satisficers differ on the number of schools they consider when choosing a school for their child?
  - (b) Do maximizers and satisficers differ in the rates at which they enroll their children in schools outside their neighborhood schools?
2. What is the relationship between the decision-making process parents use to choose a school for their children and parental satisfaction with their choice of school; are satisficers more satisfied with their school choice than maximizers?

First, what is the relationship between the decision-making process parents use to select a school for their children, and the choice they make regarding the school in which they enroll their student(s)? Second, what is the relationship between the

decision-making process parents use to choose a school for their children and parental satisfaction with their choice of school? Specifically, this chapter includes a description of the survey instrument, the procedures used in the administration of the survey, and an analysis of the data.

### Description of the Instrument

A survey was used to collect data for this study. The survey was designed by the researcher to elicit responses in four areas: school choice options, maximizing and satisficing behavior, school satisfaction, and demographics. Feedback on the clarity and comprehensiveness of the survey was solicited from administrators of participating institutions and a representative group of parents prior to the data being collected. An explanation of the survey's design follows.

#### *School Choice Options*

The first section of the survey asked parents to identify the school their child was attending at the time of the study and the boundary area school to which their child was assigned. Additionally, parents of first grade students were asked which school their child attended for kindergarten. Parents were asked to select from a list all factors that significantly influenced their choice of school for their kindergarten or first grade student. All parents were asked the number of schools they considered before finally choosing a school for their child. Theoretically, maximizers would consider more options than satisficers (Schwartz, 2004a).

#### *Maximizing and Satisficing Behavior*

The second section of the survey used a six question instrument designed to establish a parent's satisficing or maximizing propensity. Schwartz (2004b) asserted

maximizers habitually look to optimize their choice, while satisficers select the first, good enough alternative irrespective of the existence of a better alternative (Schwartz, 2004b). Schwartz et al. (2002) designed a thirteen question instrument from which a maximizing score can be generated. This thirteen question instrument has been further refined yielding a significantly shorter and equally powerful measure (Nenkov, Morrin, Ward, Schwartz, & Hulland, 2008). In a recent analysis of the thirteen question survey, Nenkov et al. validated a shortened, 6-item scale called the Maximization Scale short. The survey for this study used this six question scale. The six question scale was selected by the researcher since participants in the pilot survey believed the initial survey section determining maximizing or satisficing propensities of participants was too long.

These six questions used a 1-to-7-point Likert scale. Parents were asked to evaluate each question by selecting one of the following: 1 (*completely disagree*), 2 (*moderately disagree*), 3 (*slightly disagree*), 4 (*undecided*), 5 (*slightly agree*), 6 (*moderately agree*), or 7 (*completely agree*). A single score was calculated from the responses to the imbedded six-item Maximization Scale. A high total score indicated a propensity for maximizing behavior and participants with these scores were labeled maximizers. Those with a low total score indicated a satisficing tendency and were labeled satisficers (Schwartz, 2004a).

#### *School Satisfaction*

This section of the survey asked parents of first grade students whether or not they were satisfied with their child's kindergarten experience. Using a 1-to-5-point Likert scale, parents were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with their child's

kindergarten by selecting one of the following: 1 (*very satisfied*), 2 (*satisfied*), 3 (*neither satisfied nor dissatisfied*), 4 (*dissatisfied*), or 5 (*very dissatisfied*). It was anticipated parents who were satisfied with the kindergarten choice would consider fewer options for schooling their child the next year and be more likely to enroll their child in the same school for first grade. Conversely, parents who were not satisfied with their child's kindergarten experience would consider a greater number of other schools in which to enroll their child for first grade. Dissatisfied parents would be less likely to enroll their first grade child in the same school the child attended for kindergarten. Theoretically, satisficers would likely rate their satisfaction higher than would maximizers. Compared to maximizers, satisficers would be less likely to consider other school choices for their incoming first grade student.

#### *Demographics*

The last section of the survey instrument asked questions related to parent demographics. These demographic factors included: gender, income, ethnicity, education level, occupation, and age. For each question, parents selected the appropriate option from a drop down menu.

#### *Data Collection*

The sample for this study included parents of kindergarten and first grade students attending schools in the cities of Moorhead, Minnesota, and Fargo, North Dakota. This region contained four public school districts and several non-public schools, predominantly parochial. The presence of a mix of school options in the study region was necessary for parents to understand questions related to school choice. All four public school districts in the area were invited to participate in the

survey, but only Moorhead public schools agreed to do so. Moorhead public schools have had kindergarten and first grade in three school buildings; one building has been the site of a Spanish Immersion magnet program. All private schools were contacted and five, all parochial, consented to participate. After the initial data collection window expired, schools and districts were contacted to check their willingness to send follow-up letters to increase parent participation. While one school agreed, others did not; so additional participants were not recruited.

### Subjects

A total of 1062 survey invitations were distributed inviting parents of kindergarten and first grade students to respond to an online survey. All responses were collected through the online survey provider, Zoomerang. No option to complete a paper version of the survey was given. The invitation letter parents received contained the link to the online survey which they could enter into any internet browser. Parents could use any computer with internet access to complete the survey. Participation was voluntary. The online survey did not generate any individual identifying information on participants.

### Administration of the Survey

The investigator began this survey research upon approval of the dissertation committee, the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board, and the Graduate School. The researcher prepared the mailing which included the invitation letter explaining the study, assuring confidentiality, providing school administrators' endorsements, and informing parents of the voluntary nature of the study (Appendix A). Survey invitations were mailed to all parents of kindergarten and first grade

students in the cooperating schools and districts. Home schools and virtual schools were not included. Letters were placed in an envelope, sealed, stamped and given to a participating school's designee for mailing.

The specific steps for administering the research survey were as follows:

1. The researcher contacted schools and districts in the Moorhead, Minnesota, and Fargo, North Dakota, area asking the appropriate administrator's permission to undertake a study within their institution.
2. Once permission was secured (see Appendix B), approval from the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board was sought and granted. The project approval number was IRB-201101-197 (see Appendix C).
3. Administrators were then contacted via email or phone and were asked if they were still willing to participate and what their enrollment figures were in kindergarten and first grade. They were also asked to identify the institution's designated person responsible for mailing correspondence (designee).
4. The researcher prepared the mailing to be distributed which included a letter of invitation to parents of all kindergarten and first grade students. The letters, equaling the enrollment in kindergarten and first grade were presented to each institution's designee in a sealed, stamped envelope.
5. Each institution's designee printed labels for parents of each kindergarten and first grade student enrolled. They then affixed the labels and mailed the letters. The researcher offered to assume the material and labor costs

to schools in the preparation of the mailing. At the time of this report, no school or district has requested reimbursement.

The letter to parents invited them to participate in a survey on school choice decision-making (Appendix A). In the letter, parents were provided a link to a web page which provided information on the study. The web page also contained a link to the online survey. Participants voluntarily accessed the survey administered by Zoomerang, the online survey site. Once at the survey site, participants were given a brief introduction and were asked if they wanted to continue the survey. Participants had a two week window from the time they received the survey invitation until the survey closed.

Eight hundred nine (809) invitations were mailed to parents of children in public schools. The non-public schools distributed a total of 253 invitations. Six envelopes were returned as undeliverable. There were 121 (11.3%) visits to the online survey. Twenty (20) people who visited the site did not fill out a survey; four surveys were incomplete; and 97 (9.1%) were completed. Of these 97 completed, 53 were completed by parents of kindergarten students and 44 by parents of first grade students. The number of completed surveys by parents of non-public school students was 41 compared to 56 by public school parents.

#### Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using three different tools. Zoomerang, the online survey supplier, generated descriptive statistics. Microsoft Excel was used to present tabular data. MicrOsiris, a freeware statistics program, was used to generate chi square statistics.

The survey questions were designed to provide data to address the following issues related to individual decision-making and school choice.

*Research Question 1*

What is the relationship between the decision-making process parents use to select a school for their children, and the choice they make regarding the school in which they enroll their student(s)? Do maximizers and satisficers differ on the number of schools they consider when choosing a school for their child? Do maximizers and satisficers differ in the rates at which they enroll their children in schools outside their neighborhood schools?

*Research Question 2*

What is the relationship between the decision-making process parents use to choose a school for their children and parental satisfaction with their choice of school; are satisficers more satisfied with their school choice than maximizers?

Chapter IV provides the study's findings. The data collected is presented and summarized. The statistical analysis of the data is also presented. Chapter V presents a discussion of the results, conclusions, and the researcher's recommendations.



## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to discover how parents approach decision-making and employ decision-making strategies when choosing a school for their kindergarten or first grade child. This study was guided by two research questions.

#### Review of Research Questions

Research Question 1 addressed the questions: What is the relationship between the decision-making process parents use to select a school for their children, and the choice they make regarding the school in which they enroll their student(s)? Do maximizers and satisficers differ on the number of schools they consider when choosing a school for their child? Do maximizers and satisficers differ in the rates at which they enroll their children in schools outside their neighborhood schools?

Research Question 2 addressed the questions: What is the relationship between the decision-making process parents use to choose a school for their children and parental satisfaction with their choice of school; are satisficers more satisfied with their school choice than maximizers?

The results of the survey as it pertains to the study's central research questions are reported in this section. The survey was designed to collect responses in four areas: demographics, school choice options, maximizing and satisficing behavior, and school satisfaction.

## Demographics

A total of 1062 survey invitations were distributed. Eight hundred nine (809) were mailed to parents of children in public schools. The non-public schools distributed a total of 253 invitations. Six envelopes were returned because they were sent to undeliverable addresses. The letter invited parents to participate in an online survey. There were 121 visits to the online survey site. Twenty (20) of these visitors did not begin filling out the survey. Ninety-seven surveys were completed. Four surveys were incomplete and were not included in the analysis of the data. Of the 97 surveys completed, 53 (54.6%) were completed by parents of kindergarten students and 44 (45.4%) by parents of first grade students. The number of completed surveys by parents of non-public school students was 41 (16.2%) compared to 56 (6.9%) by public school parents.

The majority of survey parents were female,  $n = 83$  (86%); Caucasian,  $n = 87$  (90%); and married,  $n = 84$  (87%). The most commonly held occupations were in education,  $n = 24$  (25%), and healthcare,  $n = 18$  (19%). Additionally,  $n = 11$  (11%) reported they did not work, which suggests they were not employed outside the home. The tables below show participants by grade of child and school type, education level of parent by grade of child and school type, age of parent by grade of child and school type, and parent's income by grade of child and school type.

The distribution of parents who completed the online survey ( $N = 97$ ) of kindergarten students ( $n = 53$ ) and first grade students ( $n = 44$ ) based on type of school, public or non-public schools, children attended is reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of Parent Participants ( $N = 97$ ) by Grade of Child and School Type.

Grade of Child	Public School		Non-Public School	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Kindergarten	24	24.7	29	29.9
1 <sup>st</sup> Grade	32	33.0	12	12.4

Levels of education for parents who participated in the survey are shown in Table 2. Three quarters of survey participants held at least a bachelor's degree. In summary, 5 parents ( $n = 5$ ; 5.2%) possessed a high school diploma or its equivalent; 11 parents ( $n = 11$ ; 11.4%) had some college credit; 8 parents ( $n = 8$ ; 8.2%) held an Associates of Arts degree; 45 parents ( $n = 45$ ; 46.3%) earned a bachelor's degree; and, 28 parents ( $n = 28$ ; 28.8%) held a graduate or professional degree. Frequencies and percentages are provided for parents of kindergarten and first grade public school children and private school children.

Table 2. Parent Education by Grade of Child and School Type ( $N = 97$ ).

Education of Parent	Public School				Non-Public School			
	Kindergarten		First Grade		Kindergarten		First Grade	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Diploma	2	2.1	3	3.1	0	0.0	0	0.0
College	2	2.1	4	4.1	3	3.1	2	2.1
AA	3	3.1	3	3.1	1	1.0	1	1.0
BA	10	10.3	14	14.4	15	15.5	6	6.2
Grad	7	7.2	8	8.2	10	10.3	3	3.1

The frequencies and percentages of participants' ( $N = 97$ ) age by grade level of child and type of school child is attending are presented in Table 3. The total number

of parents in the 18-24 age range was 1 ( $n = 1$ ; 1%); there were 35 parents in the 25-34 age range ( $n = 35$ ; 36%); 53 parents were in the 35-44 age range ( $n = 53$ ; 55%); and 8 parents were in the 45-54 age range ( $n = 8$ ; 8%). In Table 3, percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

Table 3. Parent Age by Grade of Child and School Type ( $N = 97$ ).

Age of Parent	Public School				Non-Public School			
	Kindergarten		First Grade		Kindergarten		First Grade	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
18-24	0	0.0	1	1.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
25-34	11	11.3	11	11.3	11	11.3	2	2.1
35-44	9	9.3	17	17.5	18	18.6	9	9.3
45-54	4	4.1	3	3.1	0	0.0	1	1.0
55 >	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0

The frequencies and percentages of participants' ( $N = 97$ ) income by grade level of child and type of school child is attending are presented in Table 4. Nineteen parents ( $n = 19$ ; 19.6%) reported household income under \$50,000. Eight parents ( $n = 8$ ; 8.2%) reported income greater than \$200,000. The majority of parents reported their income fell between \$50,000 and \$199,999 ( $n = 67$ , 69.1%). The category showing the greatest number of responses was the \$50,000 to \$74,999 income range ( $n = 26$ , 26.8%), followed by the \$100,000 to \$149,999 income range ( $n = 24$ , 24.7%). Three parents ( $n = 3$ , 3.1%) indicated they preferred not to answer the question. Generally, parents of children in non-public schools reported higher income than parents of children in public schools. In Table 4, percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Table 4. Parents' Income by Grade of Child and School Type.

Income of Parent	Public School				Non-Public School			
	Kindergarten		First Grade		Kindergarten		First Grade	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Under \$15,000	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
\$15,000 - \$24,999	0	0.0	1	1.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
\$25,000 - \$34,999	0	0.0	5	5.2	1	1.0	0	0.0
\$35,000 - \$49,999	4	4.1	3	3.1	3	3.1	2	2.1
\$50,000 - \$74,999	5	5.2	9	9.3	7	7.2	5	5.2
\$75,000 - \$99,999	9	9.3	3	3.1	0	0.0	2	2.1
\$100,000 to \$149,999	2	2.1	9	9.3	12	12.4	1	1.0
\$150,000 to \$199,999	0	0.0	1	1.0	1	1.0	1	1.0
\$200,000 and higher	2	2.1	1	1.0	3	3.1	2	2.1
Prefer not to answer	2	2.1	0	0.0	1	1.0	0	0.0

### School Choice Options

#### *Factors Influencing Choice of School*

Parents have many preferences and consider a number of factors when choosing a school for their child. Prior research in school choice literature, as outlined in Chapter II, revealed factors parents consider when thinking about school choice. These factors include having siblings, family or friends enrolled in a school; attractiveness of a school grounds and classrooms; composition of a student body (gender, race, or class); access to enrichment classes, unique programs or curriculum; special education services; test scores; class size; proximity to home, daycare, or work; and, the reputation of teachers, building administrator, or district/school.

Parents were asked, “Which of the following significantly influenced your choice of school ...?” This question was asked of both kindergarten and first grade parents. The frequency and percent of participant responses for each factor affecting school choice was determined and the results are summarized below in Table 5.

Table 5. Factors Influencing School Choice.

Which of the following significantly influenced your choice of schools for ...?	Kindergarten Student ( <i>N</i> = 53)		First Grade Student ( <i>N</i> = 44)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Student has friends attending the same School	13	25.0	21	48.0
School is/has been attended by siblings	25	47.0	21	28.0
School is/has been attended by relatives or family friends	15	28.0	5	11.0
Attractive school grounds and classrooms	3	6.0	9	20.0
Composition of the student body (gender, race, socioeconomic group, etc.	9	17.0	4	9.0
Enrichment classes (i.e. art, music, gifted And talented, foreign language, etc.)	5	9.0	5	11.0
Unique programs (i.e. language immersion, science and technology)	9	17.0	6	14.0
Test scores on state or national tests	11	21.0	7	16.0
Class size or teacher to student ratio	22	42.0	12	27.0
Close to home, daycare, or work	21	40.0	23	52.0
Reputation of the teachers	24	45.0	17	39.0
Reputation of the building administrator (principal)	10	19.0	10	23.0
Reputation of the district	9	17.0	4	9.0
Special education needs	2	4.0	5	11.0
Other	22	42.0	12	27.0
Student attended the same school as a Kindergartener	NA	NA	33	75.0

Parents of kindergarten students selected all factors influencing their choice of school from a list of 15 possible factors. First grade parents also selected from among these 15 possible factors with the addition of an additional factor “student attended the same school as a kindergartener.” The average number of factors parents considered was three for both kindergarten and first grade students.

Both parents of kindergarten and first grade students identified almost the same factors influencing school choice. Table 6 shows the rank and percent of significant factors influencing school choice. Factors were selected as significant if 25% of the parents indicated the factor influenced their choice.

Table 6. Most Significant Factors Influencing School Choice by Rank and Percent.

Which of the following significantly influenced your choice of schools for ...?	Kindergarten Student ( <i>N</i> = 53)		First Grade Student ( <i>N</i> = 44)	
	<i>Rank</i>	%	<i>Rank</i>	%
Student has friends attending the same School	7	25	3	48
School is/has been attended by siblings	1	47	5	28
School is/has been attended by relatives or family friends	6	28	12	11
Class size or teacher to student ratio	3	42	6	27
Close to home, daycare, or work	5	40	2	52
Reputation of the teachers	2	45	4	39
Other	4	42	6	27
Student attended the same school as a Kindergartener	NA	NA	1	75

As previously discussed, the average number of factors parents selected as significantly influencing their choice of school was three for parents of both kindergarten and first grade students. For parents of first grade students, the data shows none of the three most influential factors for parents can be classified as academic factors. The overwhelming factor influencing parent choice of schools was that their student attended the same school as a kindergartener (Rank = 1; 75%). School proximity to daycare, work, or home (Rank = 2; 52%) and student friendships (Rank = 3; 48%) were next most influential factors.

Having had, presently or in the past, a sibling attend the school (Rank = 1; 47%) was the most important factor parents of kindergarten students considered. It is important to note that having a sibling who attends or attended a school could have either a positive or negative effect on a parent's choice. If the parent had a previously bad experience with a school attended by a child's sibling, the parent could be negatively affected and potentially disinclined to select that school.

Academic factors were important considerations for kindergarten parents. The reputation of teachers (Rank = 2; 45%) and class size (Rank = 3; 42%), both considered academic factors, were influential.

The factor "Other" ranked relatively high for both kindergarten (Rank = 4; 42%) and first grade (Rank = 6; 27%) parents. This means, of course, that parents' decision-making was influenced by factors other than ones on the survey from which they could choose.



## Maximizing and Satisficing Behavior

Imbedded in this study's survey was the Maximization Scale Short (Nenkov, Morrin, Ward, Schwartz, & Hulland, 2008; see also Schwartz, 2004; Schwartz et al., 2002). Parents were asked to rate their agreement with each item using a 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*) scale. The Maximization Scale Short includes the following questions:

1. When I am in the car listening to the radio, I often check other stations to see if something better is playing, even if I am relatively satisfied with what I'm listening to.
2. No matter how satisfied I am with my job, it's only right for me to be on the lookout for better opportunities.
3. No matter what I do, I have the highest standards for myself.
4. I often find it difficult to shop for a gift for a friend.
5. Renting videos is really difficult. I'm always struggling to pick the best one.
6. I never settle for second best.

Responses to individual questions on the Maximization scale are not relevant so numbers and percentages were not reported. Rather it is the sum of the six scores for each individual parent that determines how individuals are classified. A raw score was established from the sum of the scores for each of the six questions. Raw scores for this variable could range from 6 to 36. The summed raw scores became the variable "maximization score." Figure 1 shows the distribution of parent ( $N = 97$ ), maximization scores.

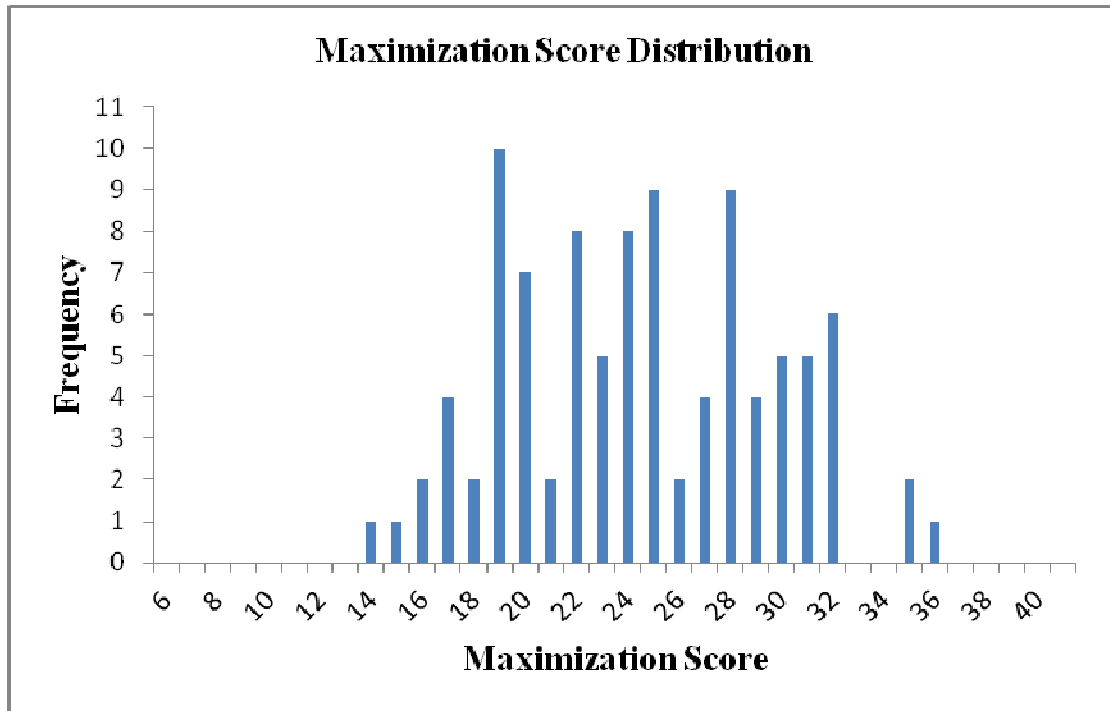


Figure 1. Maximization Score Distribution ( $N = 97$ )

The raw scores were converted to categorical data. Schwartz (2004) discussed how maximizers and satisficers might be identified. He suggested the bottom 25% of possible summed scores are satisficers and the top 75% are maximizers. The data in this study was initially categorized to reflect his discussion. Parents with scores from 6 to 14, ( $n = 0$ ), representing the bottom 25% of possible scores, were labeled satisficers and those with scores from 33 to 40 ( $n = 3$ ), representing the top 25% were labeled maximizers. Because the cell sizes for maximizers and satisficers were small, a decision was made to change how satisficers and maximizers were categorized using the mean and standard deviation ( $M = 24.5$ ;  $SD = 5.1$ ). Subsequently, parents were then categorized as satisficers if their raw scores were 6-18 ( $n = 10$ ) and parents were categorized as maximizers if their raw scores were 31-36 ( $n = 14$ ). The remaining parents ( $n = 73$ ) were labeled neither.

## School Satisfaction

This section of the survey asked parents of first grade students were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with their child's kindergarten by selecting one of the following: 1 (*very satisfied*), 2 (*satisfied*), 3 (*neither satisfied nor dissatisfied*), 4 (*dissatisfied*), or 5 (*very dissatisfied*). The hypothesis was parents who were satisfied with their kindergarten choice would consider fewer options for schooling their child the next year and be more likely to enroll their child in the same school for first grade. Eighty-two percent ( $n = 36$ ) of parents were either "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with their children's kindergarten experience while 18% ( $n = 8$ ) of parents were "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied." There were 44 parents of first grade students in the study. Eighty-two percent ( $n = 36$ ) of parents were either "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with their children's kindergarten experience while 18% ( $n = 8$ ) of parents were "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied." Additionally, the data show 91% ( $n = 40$ ) of first grade students attended the same school they attended as when they were a kindergarten student. Of the four students who changed schools between kindergarten and first grade, only one parent indicated being "very dissatisfied" with their child's kindergarten experience.

## Research Question 1

What is the relationship between the decision-making process parents use to select a school for their children, and the choice they make regarding the school in which they enroll their student(s)? This question was divided into two parts. Do maximizers and satisficers differ on the number of schools they consider when choosing a school for their child? Do maximizers and satisficers differ in the rates at

which they enroll their children in schools outside their neighborhood schools? In regards to the first part of Research Question 1, the hypothesis was parents who were satisficers would consider fewer schools for their child during their decision-making process than those who were maximizers.

Parents of kindergarten students were asked “Thinking of your kindergarten student, how many other schools (public, private, parochial, homeschool, public charter, or virtual) did you consider before selecting your child’s school this year?” Parents of first grade students were asked, “Thinking of your 1<sup>st</sup> grade student, how many other schools (public, private, parochial, homeschool, public charter, or virtual) did you consider before selecting your child’s school this year?” Table 7 shows the frequencies and percentages of responses. For both grade levels, parents selected one of the following options: (a) I considered no other school, (b) 1 or 2 other schools, (c) 3 to 5 other schools, (d) 6 or more other schools, or (e) I do not recall.

Table 7. Parent Responses to the Question: “How many other schools did you consider before selecting your child’s school this year?”

Age of Parent	Public School				Non-Public School			
	Kindergarten		First Grade		Kindergarten		First Grade	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
No other	12	22.6	25	56.8	15	28.3	7	15.9
1 or 2	10	18.9	7	15.9	11	20.8	5	11.4
3 to 5	2	3.8	0	0.0	3	5.7	0	0.0
6 or more	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Don’t recall	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0

Percentages for kindergarten student based on  $N = 53$ ; for first grade students,  $N = 44$ .

A chi-square test was used to determine whether there was a significant difference between satisficers and maximizers on the number of schools they considered before enrolling their child in their current school. The difference was statistically significant ( $X^2 = 11.182, df = 4, p < .02$ ). This means satisficers and maximizers differed on the number of schools they had considered.

The second part of Research Question 1 stated: Do maximizers and satisficers differ in the rates at which they enroll their children in schools outside their neighborhood schools? The hypothesis raised by this question was satisficers will enroll their child outside of their neighborhood school at a lower rate than maximizers. A chi-square test was used to determine whether there was a significant difference between maximizers and satisficers on the rate in which they enrolled their children as students outside their neighborhood school. There was no statistically significant relationship ( $X^2 = 1.3948, df = 2, p < .50$ ) between satisficers' and maximizers' enrollment of their children in schools outside of neighborhood schools. This means satisficers and maximizers enrolled their children outside of the neighborhood school at similar rates.

#### Research Question 2

What is the relationship between the decision-making process parents use to choose a school for their children and parental satisfaction with their choice of school; are satisficers more satisfied with their school choice than maximizers? The hypothesis was parents of first grade students who are maximizers will have been less satisfied with their child's kindergarten experience than parents who are satisficers. There was no statistically significant difference ( $X^2 = 13.394, df = 2, p < .10$ ) between

satisficers and maximizers and a parent's satisfaction with their choice of kindergarten. Data showed 81.5% ( $n = 27$ ) of parents of first grade children in public schools and 83.3% ( $n = 10$ ) of parents of first grade children in private school were either satisfied or very satisfied with their choice of their child(ren)'s kindergarten. Fifty percent ( $n = 2$ ) of maximizers and 100% ( $n = 4$ ) of satisficers were satisfied or very satisfied with their choice of their child(ren)'s kindergarten.

Chapter V provides a summary and discussion of the study with its findings. Additionally, Chapter V presents recommendations for policy makers and researchers.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate parent decision-making regarding school choice. Parents of kindergarten and first grade students in a public school district in Minnesota and private schools in surrounding communities were invited to participate. A chi-square analysis was used to determine whether or not there was a difference between maximizers and satisficers in regard to the number of schools parents considered before choosing a school in which to enroll their child(ren), the number of students enrolled outside the neighborhood school, and satisfaction of parents with their children's school. The data showed a relationship between maximizing-satisficing propensity and the number of schools parents considered before choosing a school for their child(ren).

#### Findings and Discussion

Survey data were collected on how parents approached the decision-making task of choosing a school for their child. The survey was designed to collect data from parents in four areas: demographics, satisficing and maximizing behavior, educational options considered and selected, and satisfaction with educational placement.

This study was guided by two research questions. The first question examined parents' approach to decision-making when selecting a school for their child(ren).

The second question focused on the outcome of that choice. Findings for each question are reported, discussed, and summarized separately.

*Research Question 1(a): Do Maximizers and Satisficers Differ on the Number of Schools They Consider When Choosing a School for Their Child?*

The hypothesis was parents who were satisficers would consider fewer schools for their child than those who were maximizers. The difference was statistically significant ( $\Pi^2 = 11.182$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .02$ ). This means satisficers and maximizers differed on the number of schools they considered.

Looking back at Table 3, we see about a quarter of kindergarten parents enrolling their child in the only school they considered. Specifically, 25% of public school parents and 27% of private school parents reported they did not consider any other school than the one their child attended at the time of this study.

Education in the United States is compulsory (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011). Parents need to enroll their child in a school. So, why do parents enroll their child(ren) in a school without considering alternative schools?

Perhaps a parent does not recognize selecting a school for their child as a problem to be solved. If parents are not required to make a choice, parents must first decide *if* they are going to make a choice. According to Buckley and Schneider (2007) “they must be dissatisfied enough with their existing schools or be sufficiently attracted to an alternative to their neighborhood school that they decide to exercise choice” (p. 51). So, it is not a question of whether or not parents engage in a rational process to choose, they may not engage in any process at all. Their child is enrolled in



the school assigned to the neighborhood where the family lives. The parents are deciding by not deciding. The neighborhood school is the default.

Moreover, parents may not realize they have a choice. Parents cannot make a choice if they lack basic information about the presence of school choice and the options available to them. Let us consider that school choice options can be overwhelming. To address the problem and ultimately arrive at a decision, parents need to collect information. Once parents understand they have enrollment options for their children, they can ask the question: What information do I need to make my decision? Consistent with rational choice theory, parents will gather information on all the choices available to them given a set of preferences. They will keep looking until they find the optimal school. Those individuals are maximizers. Unfortunately, there might be too many school choice options to identify and too much information to study. Under conditions of bounded rationality, it is recognized parents are limited in the amount of time they have to collect information and in their capacity to understand what they find out. According to Schwartz (2004a):

To a maximizer, satisficers appear to be willing to settle for mediocrity, but that is not the case. A satisficer may be just as discriminating as a maximizer. The difference between the two types is that the satisficer is content with the merely excellent as opposed to the absolute best. (p. 78)

While some parents will act as maximizers and seek out the optimal choice, others will satisfice, selecting the first choice that meets their preferences. So, satisficers will employ a stop rule and cease looking once they find an option that is good enough.

According to the data, parents satisfice when choosing a school for their child(ren). The hypothesis was that parents who were satisficers would look at fewer schools. The conclusions from the data supported the hypothesis and satisficers did look at fewer schools. Also, the idea of satisficing does not require parents to do an exhaustive search but simply to take the first, good enough alternative. One could argue that these parents, about a quarter of the total sample, rationally sought to do a complete search but satisficed and selected the first alternative that met their basic preferences.

Alternately, the finding could suggest that parents did not make a choice and just defaulted to their neighborhood school. While this may be the case for some, this analysis does not make sense when looking at parents who chose private schools. Roughly one quarter of private school parents reported they did not consider another school except the non-public school in which they enrolled. This could mean parents did not consider their neighborhood school in particular or public schools in general before making a choice.

This finding is important for school district administrators. If one quarter of private school parents do not consider public schools at all, one wonders if these parents can be persuaded to consider public schools if they had more information. Furthermore, what type of information would be effective in influencing parents predisposed to enrolling their children in a non-public school?

Still there are alternate explanations. Values are important. This was seen in the parents comments about factors influencing their choice of school for their child(ren). Green and Hoover-Dempsey (2007) looked at reasons parents forego

public schools in favor of homeschooling. They found personal values and, to a greater degree, personal efficacy contributed to parents' decisions to homeschool their children. Values might trump rationality or at least supplant it. In other words, no decision-making process occurs in some instances when values dictate where children are schooled (as in homeschooling or in schooling children in religion-based private schools).

The survey questions did not seek to discover if religion or values were factors to consider when making a school choice. I viewed religion and values as curriculum to be taught. However, religion was cited by a number of parents as a primary determinant of their choice of private school and indicated its importance in the narrative comments they made at the end of the survey or by selecting the option "other" when asked about factors influencing their school choice.

Ball (1993, 2006) observed the limitation of economics to explain choice behavior. His sociological framework might explain choice in education. Ball (2006) spoke about how important the "grapevine" has been in making choices. Parents may choose a school because they literally "heard it through the grapevine"; they heard that it was a good school. Ball suggested there are two opposing ways of looking at information. He labeled one, "official" knowledge and the other "grapevine" knowledge. Official knowledge is characterized by logic, abstract information, evidence, and results. In contrast, grapevine information is based on emotion, direct knowledge, anecdotes, and impressions. Official knowledge is given *to* people while grapevine knowledge is experienced *by* people (p. 252).

Ball (2006) went on to say that official knowledge is suspect and he supported this allegation with testimony he gathered from individuals through his research. He stated:

“Official” knowledge is “cold” knowledge, normally constructed specifically for public dissemination. The form it takes is abstract – examination results, lists of school activities, outlines of school policies, etc. “Grapevine” knowledge is “hot” knowledge based on affective responses or direct experience. For some parents, personal recommendation is perceived to be far more trustworthy than apparently “objective” data . . . (p. 252)

Ball explained that “Where you live, who you know, and what community you belong to are vital determinates of the particular grapevine that is open to you” (p. 252). His explanation suggests that the church community to which parents belong could potentially influence school choice. Parents of private school students who then make their decision with information obtained through the grapevine may not be motivated to seek out information about other options.

Since all non-public schools in this study were parochial schools, Ball’s explanation could be, in the context of this report, applicable and plausible. In this report, many parents of private school students considered no other school besides the one in which they had enrolled their child. Religious values and a belief that only a private school can provide instruction in those values was one reason parents stated for why they selected the school they did for their children.

*Research Question 1(b): Do Maximizers and Satisficers Differ in the Rates They Enroll Their Students in Schools Outside of Their Neighborhood Schools?*

The hypothesis was satisficers will enroll their children outside neighborhood schools at a lower rate than maximizers. A chi-square test showed no statistically significant difference. This means satisficers and maximizers enrolled their children outside of their neighborhood schools at similar rates. This finding indicates there is no inherent dispositional factor, whether satisficing or maximizing, that accounts for a parent's decision to enroll their child in a school or program outside the neighborhood school.

This finding is confounded by the presence of a magnet program housed within one of the neighborhood schools. This study treated enrollment in this magnet program as enrolling outside the neighborhood school. The reason for this decision was because parents had to apply to have their child enrolled in the program. It was assumed parents were interested in the magnet program as an alternative to the regular curriculum offered and that they would have enrolled their child in the program no matter where it was housed. Hence, parents would be exiting their neighborhood school.

*Research Question 2: What is the Relationship Between the Decision-Making Process and Parental Satisfaction With Their Choice: Are Satisficers More Satisfied With Their School Choice Than Maximizers ?*

The hypothesis was parents of first grade students who are maximizers will be less satisfied with their child's kindergarten experience than parents who are satisficers. There was no statistically significant difference between maximizers and satisficers on how satisfied parents were with their child's kindergarten experience. In

fact, 82% of first grade parents were either satisfied or very satisfied with their child's kindergarten experience. However, it is possible their perceptions nearly a year later were tempered by time. The response they selected in this study may have been different from what it might have been at the end of their child's kindergarten year.

### Limitations

Results of this study have been limited to the reliability and validity of the instrument designed in this study. I designed the survey instrument after reviewing the literature. Members of the dissertation committee made helpful suggestions as well. A pilot of the survey was given to a group of parents for feedback. School administrators were also given the opportunity to provide input before granting me permission to conduct the survey with parents. Unfortunately, no group suggested adding religion or values as separate factors influencing school choice.

While indicating initial interest in the study, two area school districts decided not to participate. The study's research design was more suitable for a site with a wide range of choice options. The sample from which this study was drawn had more limited choices than the original site planned for the study.

### Recommendations

#### *For Researchers*

Three general observations may be made about the study which might be taken into consideration in subsequent research on this topic. The first observation is that identifying maximizers and satisficers is problematic because the literature is conflicting. Second, the representative nature of the sample is important to understand how individuals of diverse backgrounds view and approach school choice. Finally, a

qualitative rather than quantitative research design may best understand how parents make school choice decisions. Discussion and recommendations follow.

### *Maximizing and Satisficing*

The data in this study was coded to treat maximizing and satisficing as discrete categories. Schwartz (2004a) stated, “The alternative to maximizing is to be a satisficer” (p. 78). Schwartz et al. (2002) developed the Maximization Scale and Nenkov et al. (2008) refined it creating the Maximization short inventory which was imbedded in this study’s survey. According to Schwartz (2004a), low raw scores indicate placement on the satisficing end of the scale whereas high raw scores indicate placement on the maximizing end. Nenkov et al. (2008) stated, “There is no reason to believe that maximizing and satisficing are on opposite ends of a continuum. It is not even clear what it might be a continuum of” (p. 385). This is not to conclude the Maximization Scale short form embedded in the survey was problematic, though it might have been. Since the literature is not in agreement, it is recommended future researchers locate additional studies refining the criteria used to identify satisficers and maximizers.

### *Importance of a Representative Sample*

Few parents in this study represented underserved groups. The demographic information collected did not ask parents if their children received free or reduced price lunches. Schools use information on students who qualify for free or reduced price lunches as a criterion to provide additional services to lower income families. The federal government provides additional funds to schools which have high concentrations of students qualifying for free and reduced price lunches. Additionally,

Minnesota separates children who qualify for free or reduced price lunches from children who do not when determining whether or not a school is making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

While it has been becoming more racially diverse, the community from which the research population was drawn was largely white. Parents of underserved students (identified minority or qualified free and reduced price lunch recipients) were not well represented in this study. Instead, the majority of parents were white, middle class parents. At the time of this study, a growing number of students had been eligible for free and reduced price lunches. Moreover, Jacob and Lefgren (2007) found parents who are from underserved populations and their counterparts view educational policies or programs differently. Their findings indicate parent preference *and* family circumstance may both influence what parents want from schools. It is recommended that free and reduced price lunch status be included as a variable in future research because it has the possibility of significantly altering the findings of a similar study.

Ensuring a representative sample might have lead to different results. Specific populations might have been excluded, in part, because an online survey was used. Many low income people do not have adequate internet access. Others may have limited proficiency in English. While an online survey was expeditious, it might have excluded some groups. One recommendation is for future studies to create an incentive to complete the survey. After speaking with a district official, I abandoned my initial idea of contributing one dollar upon completion of the survey, to the school in which the parent's child was enrolled. I believe had I not abandoned this idea, I would have increased the survey response rate with this incentive. I recommend in



future research creating some incentive which would appeal to a broad cross section of the community. This recommendation holds for online, mail, or in person surveys.

A second recommendation would be to conduct the survey at a community or cultural center. Individuals might feel more comfortable at a center than at a school. Additionally, formal or informal translation services could be made available. In summary, the recommendation would be to alter the survey's administration to ensure broad participation and a representative sample.

### *Research Design*

The survey used in this study included a place for parents' comments. The richness of the comments could not adequately be captured through the research design. I have come to believe that context is extremely important to understand choice. For example, it has been observed that when designing choice options, "You've got to look and see how the program interacts with the demographic and economic makeup of the community" (Viadero, 1995, p. 32). This topic might be better studied through a qualitative or mixed methods design.

The major tenant of bounded rationality is that individuals often satisfice due to time constraints. The number of hours parents work, within and outside the home, may correlate with satisficing or maximizing decision-making. Single parents may have constraints on their time and could choose schools based more on convenience than academic quality. So, parents could be asked about the number of hours of leisure they have each week. Asking parents questions to understand constraints on their time is recommended.

Parents of children who are homeschooled or who are enrolled in virtual schools were not included in the study. There were two reasons for this. First, in Minnesota, compulsory education begins at age seven for students, and parents do not need to inform the school district of their intentions to homeschool their child until then. Second, virtual schools were excluded because most enroll primarily students in grades seven through twelve. I recommend including parents of homeschooled children in future studies and revisiting the inclusion of virtual schools.

*For State and Federal Policymakers*

Currently, the federal government allows each state to set education policy regarding school choice. The variability in policy across state lines suggests there is disagreement on the scope of school choice options with some state legislatures favoring vouchers, while others push to expand charter schools. Some states, such as Minnesota have well established public policy defining school choice options. Other states, such as North Dakota, have not passed legislation allowing charter schools. Even when legislation is enacted outlining the scope of school choice, states have generally relied upon local school districts to provide information about the choices available to parents when selecting a school for their child(ren). Additionally, state government policy generally fails to include provisions to compel school districts to inform parents of choice options outside the district. Choice may exist, but parents may not know their options. Survey data showed roughly 25% of parents reported they did not consider other schools before they enrolled their child in a school. While some parents may have been apathetic, others might not have understood they have options. One recommendation for state level policymakers would be strengthening

legislation to ensure parents are informed about school choice. Unless state statutes require all parents be formally and intentionally informed about options outside the public school system, there is no incentive for local districts to do so.

There is a significant disincentive to school districts receiving funding on a per pupil basis to educate their public about school choice options. While the duty seems clear that districts inform parents of choice options within a district, informing parents of choices outside a district is detrimental to the financial health of the district. Under conditions of per pupil funding, if a student leaves the district, the dollars attached to that student also leave the district. Declining resources hampers district reform efforts and ultimately diminishes the quality of education for students who remain in assigned schools and whose parents do not take advantage of choice options. Schools and school districts would need to improve in some area to lure students, and their accompanying dollars, back. Issues related to school finance likely need to be addressed.

Moreover, school districts are ultimately responsible for the education of students within their boundaries irrespective of where students receive that education. Should a charter school shut down because of the poor academic progress of students, and those students return to the public schools, the district is responsible for addressing the deficiencies. If a large number return, the district may be in jeopardy of not reaching AYP targets due, in part, to “no fault of their own.” Providing information about and encouraging parents to consider all options, including education options outside their own district, may be self defeating for school districts. Parents may choose a substandard school outside a school district, to only later leave the poor

performing school, and return their children to the home district. The home school district is then responsible for redressing poor performance by returning students on state standardized tests. Both the federal and state governments have begun to address this issue by looking at the growth of individual students versus the performance of a school or school district as a whole. The recommendation is to move toward a growth model to assess student achievement, thereby eliminating one disincentive for districts to provide parents about school choice options.

If school choice is the panacea for education reform that the federal and state governments profess it to be, then using public service announcements may be effective in converting parents into knowledgeable consumers. Public service announcements are used to “get out the vote.” By choosing a school, parents learn to seek out information, and by choosing, vote with their feet. Unfortunately, the parents who would be the primary targets of these advertisements aimed at school choice, if compared to voters in elections, would not vote. The absence of political efficacy leaves many voters home on election day. The lack of personal efficacy may lead many parents to choose the default school to which their child is assigned. State and federal efforts to inform parents about school choice, through some type of marketing campaign might be necessary. While even the best informational campaigns are ineffective if parents are unmotivated to seek out options and make intentional decisions, the recommendation is for state officials to continue efforts to provide school choice information using a variety of media.

Finally, the availability of schooling options, speaking of charter schools in particular, vary considerably both within and between states. While there have been

efforts and monetary support by the federal government to encourage the expansion of charter schools, states continue to have the option of whether or not to adopt charter school legislation. Even when state legislatures allow charter schools, they are often concentrated in metropolitan centers. Students in small towns and rural areas may have access to cyber charters but barriers, such as a reliable internet connection, restrict some students. The recommendation would be for states to ensure reliable internet connectivity to rural areas so students can take advantage of any number of cyber charters.

#### *For Schools and School Districts*

Test scores and other academic measures may be good indicators of the quality of education. There is a belief among policymakers these indicators may drive parent choice. They argue parents may leave poorly performing schools for good ones. The findings from this study suggest parents may not enter into an exhaustive search for the best school for their child. In fact, they may not engage in any deliberate choice at all. Or, as Ball (2006) suggested, “official” information (based on evidence and results) might hold less importance than that which parents obtain through the “grapevine.” Informal channels may be important to parents when they are making their school choice. Therefore, one recommendation to schools and districts is to identify ways to increase contact with prospective parents through informal channels. It is particularly important to target efforts at kindergarten students. The findings from this study show 75% of parents of first grade students did not change their child’s school between their child’s kindergarten and first grade year of school. One route to

attract parents might be through linking preschool programs with kindergarten programs to allow the school or district to form an early relationship with parents.

Along this same line, it is recommended that local schools and districts look beyond the reporting of official information about their institution. While 21% of parents of kindergarten students and 16% of parents of first grade students considered test scores an important factor in their choice of schools, parents were doubly influenced by the reputation of teachers and class size.

Another recommendation for districts and school administrators is to increase parent involvement. The “lack of parental involvement is the biggest problem facing public schools” (Michigan Department of Education, 2002, p. 1). Parents do not intuitively know how to best help their child(ren) succeed in school. School districts may choose to offer classes to parents on how to track their child(ren)’s progress, or help with homework. When children are doing well in school, and parents believe they are in partnership with their child(ren)’s teachers, it stands to reason that parents will have more positive feelings about the school.

School and districts need to find ways to retain quality teachers. This report shows that 45% of parents of kindergarten students and 39% of parents of first grade students considered the reputation of teachers an important consideration when choosing a school. It is recommended that good teachers be retained and professional development be focused on increasing teacher effectiveness.

Finally, schools and districts need to find common ground for collaboration. While the current tenor of school choice is one of competition, collaboration may well increase student achievement more rapidly. Zehr (2010) reported that the Bill and

Melinda Gates Foundation “is providing grants to enable charter schools and traditional school districts in nine cities to share best practices and solve problems together” (para. 1). It is recommended that schools, districts, governments, corporations and foundations work to identify ways to increase student achievement through unique collaborative efforts.

## APPENDICES



APPENDIX A  
LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

February 1, 2011

Dear Parents,

You are invited to participate in a research study, being done by Kristine A. Thompson, a graduate student in the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of North Dakota. The study is entitled, *Satisficing: A decision-making strategy for school choice?* Your school approved this research study and the consent form is available for review.

You have been selected to participate because you have a student currently in kindergarten or 1<sup>st</sup> grade. Parents in the Fargo-Moorhead area have an increasing variety of school choice options when deciding where to enroll their child. My primary research question seeks to understand the relationship between the decision-making process a parent uses and the choice they make in selecting a school for their child. I am asking you to voluntarily participate in the collection of data for this study by taking an online survey.

This study is being conducted to fulfill the dissertation requirement for a PhD in Educational Leadership under the supervision of my advisor, Dr. Sherryl Houdek, of the University of North Dakota, Department of Educational Leadership. Your participation is entirely voluntary. The University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed and approved this study. My project approval number is IRB-201101-197. All IRB regulations and guidelines for respondent confidentiality will be followed to protect your privacy. There will be no disclosure of your name or any personal identifying information. You cannot be linked to your responses. If you have any questions about the IRB process you may the UND Research Development and Compliance office at 701-777-4279.

The website for this study explains the research in greater detail and provides a link that will take you to the online survey. You will be asked at each stage if you want to continue. Again, your participation is entirely voluntary. There is no compensation for your participation and it is unlikely you will receive any immediate or direct benefit from the study. Results from this study will be available for review. If you are willing, please:

**Open your computer's web browser as you normally would,**

**Type in the following web address: <http://schoolchoiceminnesota.blogspot.com/>**

The address will take you to the website "School Choice Decision-making" where you will learn more about the study and find the link to the online survey. You may choose to take the survey or exit the website. The survey will remain active until February 21, 2011.

Thank you for assisting me with my study. If you have questions, please contact me or my advisor, Dr. Sherryl Houdek.

Sincerely,

Kristine Thompson  
University of North Dakota PhD candidate  
122 10<sup>th</sup> St N  
Moorhead, MN 56560  
701-412-3623  
Kristine.thompson@moorhead.k12.mn.us

Sincerely,

Dr. Sherryl Houdek  
Department of Educational Leadership  
University of North Dakota  
Grand Forks, ND 58202  
701-777-2394  
[sherryl.houdek@und.edu](mailto:sherryl.houdek@und.edu)

APPENDIX B

LETTER OF CONSENT

Satisficing: A decision-making strategy for school choice?

Participating Institution's Consent Form

I, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_,  
(Name) (Title)  
at \_\_\_\_\_ give  
(Institution)

approval for Kristine A. Thompson, a doctoral student in Educational Leadership at the University of North Dakota, to invite all parents of kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade students to participate in an online survey on school choice decision-making. The invitation letter will be distributed in a mutually agreed upon method at the researcher's expense.

I understand a copy of the findings from this study will be available to me in electronic or printed form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

APPENDIX C  
IRB APPROVAL LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF  NORTH DAKOTA

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
c/o RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT AND COMPLIANCE  
DIVISION OF RESEARCH  
TWAYLEY HALL ROOM 106  
264 CENTENNIAL DRIVE STOP 2134  
GRAND FORKS ND 58202-2134  
TEL: 701-777-4279  
FAX: 701-777-6708  
[www.und.edu/dept/irb/c/rogacion/LAB](http://www.und.edu/dept/irb/c/rogacion/LAB)

January 19, 2011

Kristine Thompson  
122 10<sup>th</sup> St. N  
Moorhead, MN 56503

Dear Ms. Thompson:

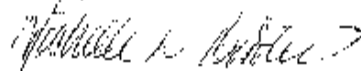
We are pleased to inform you that your project titled, 'Satisficing: A Decision-Making Strategy for School Choice' (IRB-201101-197) has been reviewed and approved by the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board (IRB). The expiration date of this approval is November 15, 2011.

As principal investigator for a study involving human participants, you assume certain responsibilities to the University of North Dakota and the UND IRB. Specifically, any adverse events or departures from the protocol that occur must be reported to the IRB immediately. It is your obligation to inform the IRB in writing if you would like to change aspects of your approved project, prior to implementing such changes.

When your research, including data analysis, is completed, you must submit a Research Project Termination form to the IRB office so your file can be closed. A Termination form has been enclosed and is also available on the IRB website.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to call me at (701) 777-4079 or e-mail [michellebowles@mail.und.edu](mailto:michellebowles@mail.und.edu).

Sincerely,



Michelle L. Bowles, M.P.A.  
IRB Coordinator

MLB:/je

Enclosures

## APPENDIX D

### SURVEY



Satisficing: Decision-making for school choice 2010-2011 (1)

Created: January 31 2011, 11:53 AM  
Last Modified: July 06 2011, 6:39 AM  
Design Theme: Basic Blue  
Language: English  
Button Options: Labels  
Disable Browser "Back" Button: False

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Satisficing: Decision-making for school choice 2010-2011

#### Question 1 - Yes or No

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. This survey will take about three minutes to complete.

Participation is voluntary. The results are anonymous and confidential. You cannot be individually linked to your response.

If at any time you wish to end the survey you may do so by exiting the survey window.

Do you wish to continue with the survey?

- Yes
- No [Skip to End]

#### Question 2 - Yes or No

Do you currently have a child in Kindergarten?

- Yes
- No [Skip to 7]

Question 3 - Choice - One Answer (Drop Down)

What school does your Kindergarten student attend?

- Oak Grove Lutheran
- Park Christian - Fargo
- Park Christian - Moorhead
- St. Joseph School
- Nativity
- Holy Spirit
- Ellen Hopkins - Spanish Immersion using K+ Option
- Ellen Hopkins - Spanish Immersion
- Ellen Hopkins using K+ Option
- Ellen Hopkins
- Robert Asp using K+ Option
- Robert Asp
- S.G. Reinertson (Probstfield)
- S.G. Reinertson (Probstfield) using K+ Option
- Clayton A. Lodoen Kindergarten Center (West Fargo)
- Osgood Kindergarten Center (West Fargo)
- Horace Elementary
- Bennett (Fargo)
- Centennial (Fargo)
- Clara Barton Hawthorne (Fargo)
- Horace Mann Roosevelt (Fargo)
- Jefferson (Fargo)
- Kennedy (Fargo)
- Lewis & Clark (Fargo)
- Lincoln (Fargo)
- Longfellow (Fargo)
- Madison (Fargo)
- McKinley (Fargo)
- Washington (Fargo)
- Dilworth Elementary
- Glyndon-Felton Elementary
- Homeschool
- Virtual school
- Other

## Heading

School districts operate public elementary and secondary schools. School districts typically assign students to a school based upon attendance boundary areas. For various reasons, a parent may decide to enroll their child in a school other than the one to which their child is assigned.

In this survey, a school is defined as the individual school building (for example, Eastwood, Hopkins, Saint Joseph, etc.).

## Question 4 - Choice - One Answer (Drop Down)

To what school is your Kindergarten student assigned?

- Ellen Hopkins
- Robert Asp
- S.G. Reinertsen - Probstfield
- Clayton A. Lodoen Kindergarten Center (West Fargo)
- Osgood Kindergarten Center (West Fargo)
- Horace Elementary (West Fargo)
- Bennett (Fargo)
- Centennial (Fargo)
- Clara Barton Hawthorne (Fargo)
- Horace Mann Roosevelt (Fargo)
- Jefferson (Fargo)
- Kennedy (Fargo)
- Lewis & Clark (Fargo)
- Lincoln (Fargo)
- Longfellow (Fargo)
- Madison (Fargo)
- McKinley (Fargo)
- Washington (Fargo)
- Dilworth Elementary
- Glyndon-Felton Elementary
- Other

Question 5 - Choice - Multiple Answers (Bullets)

Thinking of your current kindergarten student,

How many other schools (public, private, parochial, homeschool, public charter, or virtual) did you consider before selecting your child's school this year?

- I considered no other school
- 1 or 2
- 3 to 5
- 6 or more
- I do not recall

Question 6 - Choice - Multiple Answers (Bullets)

Parents select their child's school for a variety of reasons. Which of the following significantly influenced your choice of school for your kindergarten student? (Please select all that apply)

- Student has friends attending the same school
  - School is/has been attended by siblings
  - School is/has been attended by relatives or family friends
  - Attractive school grounds and classrooms
  - Composition of the student body (gender, race, socioeconomic group, etc.)
  - Enrichment classes (i.e. art, music, gifted and talented, foreign language, etc.)
  - Unique programs (i.e. language immersion, science and technology magnet school, Montessori, etc.)
  - Test Scores on State or National tests
  - Class Size or Teacher to student ratio
  - Close to home, daycare or work
  - Reputation of the teachers
  - Reputation of the building administrator (Principal)
  - Reputation of the district
  - Special education needs
  - Other, please specify
- 

Question 7 - Yes or No

Do you currently have a child in 1st Grade?

- Yes
- No [Skip to 13]



Question 8 - Choice - One Answer (Drop Down)

What school does your 1st Grade student attend?

- Oak Grove Lutheran
- Park Christian - Fargo
- Park Christian - Moorhead
- St. Joseph School
- Nativity
- Holy Spirit
- Ellen Hopkins - Spanish Immersion
- Ellen Hopkins
- Robert Asp
- S.G. Reinertsen
- Horace Elementary (West Fargo)
- Aurora Elementary (West Fargo)
- Eastwood Elementary (West Fargo)
- Harwood Elementary (West Fargo)
- L.E. Berger Elementary (West Fargo)
- South Elementary (West Fargo)
- Westside Elementary (West Fargo)
- Bennett (Fargo)
- Centennial (Fargo)
- Clara Barton Hawthorne (Fargo)
- Horace Mann Roosevelt (Fargo)
- Jefferson (Fargo)
- Kennedy (Fargo)
- Lewis & Clark (Fargo)
- Lincoln (Fargo)
- Longfellow (Fargo)
- Madison (Fargo)
- McKinley (Fargo)
- Washington (Fargo)
- Dilworth Elementary
- Glyndon-Felton Elementary
- Homeschool
- Virtual school
- Other

Question 9 - Choice - One Answer (Bullets)

Is this the same school your child attended in Kindergarten?

- Yes
- No

## Heading

School districts operate public elementary and secondary schools. School districts typically assign students to a school based upon attendance boundary areas. For various reasons, a parent may decide to enroll their child in a school other than the one to which their child is assigned.

In this survey, a school is defined as the individual school building (for example, Eastwood, Hopkins, Saint Joseph, etc.).

## Question 10 - Choice - One Answer (Drop Down)

To what school is your 1st Grade student assigned?

- Ellen Hopkins
- Robert Asp
- S.G. Reinertsen
- Horace Elementary (West Fargo)
- Aurora Elementary (West Fargo)
- Eastwood Elementary (West Fargo)
- Harwood Elementary (West Fargo)
- L.E. Berger Elementary (West Fargo)
- South Elementary (West Fargo)
- Westside Elementary (West Fargo)
- Bennett (Fargo)
- Centennial (Fargo)
- Clara Barton Hawthorne (Fargo)
- Horace Mann Roosevelt (Fargo)
- Jefferson (Fargo)
- Kennedy (Fargo)
- Lewis & Clark (Fargo)
- Lincoln (Fargo)
- Longfellow (Fargo)
- Madison (Fargo)
- McKinley (Fargo)
- Washington (Fargo)
- Dilworth Elementary
- Glyndon-Felton Elementary
- Other

Question 11 - Choice - One Answer (Drop Down)

Parents can decide each year where to send their child to school.  
What school did your child attend for Kindergarten during the 2009-2010 school year?

- Oak Grove Lutheran
- Park Christian - Fargo
- Park Christian - Moorhead
- St. Joseph School
- Nativity
- Holy Spirit
- Ellen Hopkins - Spanish Immersion using K+ Option
- Ellen Hopkins - Spanish Immersion
- Ellen Hopkins using K+ Option
- Ellen Hopkins
- Robert Asp using K+ Option
- Robert Asp
- S.G. Reinertsen - Probstfield
- S.G. Reinertsen - Probstfield using K+ Option
- Clayton A. Lodoen Kindergarten Center (West Fargo)
- Osgood Kindergarten Center (West Fargo)
- Bennett (Fargo)
- Centennial (Fargo)
- Clara Barton Hawthorne (Fargo)
- Horace Mann Roosevelt (Fargo)
- Jefferson (Fargo)
- Kennedy (Fargo)
- Lewis & Clark (Fargo)
- Lincoln (Fargo)
- Longfellow (Fargo)
- Madison (Fargo)
- McKinley (Fargo)
- Washington (Fargo)
- Dilworth Elementary
- Glyndon-Felton Elementary
- Homeschool
- Virtual school
- Other

Question 12 - Rating Scale - One Answer (Horizontal)

In general, how satisfied were you with your child's kindergarten experience?

very satisfied	s a t i s f i e d	neither satisfied	d i s s a t i s f i e d	v e r y
s a t i s f i e d		nor dissatisfied		d i s s a t i s f i e d
1	2	3	4	5

Question 13 - Choice - Multiple Answers (Bullets)

Thinking of your current 1st Grade student, how many other schools (public, private, parochial, homeschool, public charter or virtual) did you consider before selecting your child's school this year?

- I considered no other school
- 1 or 2 other schools
- 3 to 5 other schools
- 6 or more other schools
- I do not recall

Question 14 - Choice - Multiple Answers (Bullets)

Parents select their child's school for a variety of reasons. Which of the following significantly influenced your choice of school for your 1st grade child? (Please select all that apply)

- Student attended the same school as a kindergartener
- Student has friends attending the same school
- School is/has been attended by siblings
- School is/has been attended by relatives or family friends
- Attractive school grounds and classrooms
- Composition of the student body (gender, race, socioeconomic group, etc.)
- Enrichment classes (i.e. art, music, gifted and talented, foreign language, etc.)
- Unique programs (i.e. language immersion, science and technology magnet school, Montessori, etc.)
- Test Scores on State or National tests
- Class Size or Teacher to student ratio
- Close to home, daycare or work
- Reputation of the teachers
- Reputation of the building administrator (Principal)
- Reputation of the district
- Special education needs
- Other, please specify

## Heading

People make decisions differently. These next 6 questions ask about how you typically approach decision-making tasks.

### Question 15 - Rating Scale - One Answer (Horizontal)

When I am in the car listening to the radio, I often check other stations to see if something better is playing, even if I am relatively satisfied with what I'm listening to.

Completely Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Undecided	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Completely Agree
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### Question 16 - Rating Scale - One Answer (Horizontal)

No matter how satisfied I am with my job, it's only right for me to be on the lookout for better opportunities.

Completely Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Undecided	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Completely Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Question 17 - Rating Scale - One Answer (Horizontal)

No matter what I do, I have the highest standards for myself.

Completely Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Undecided	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Completely Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Question 18 - Rating Scale - One Answer (Horizontal)

I often find it difficult to shop for a gift for a friend.

Completely Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Undecided	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Completely Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Question 19 - Rating Scale - One Answer (Horizontal)

Renting videos is really difficult. I'm always struggling to pick the best one.

Completely Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Undecided	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Completely Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Question 20 - Rating Scale - One Answer (Horizontal)

I never settle for second best.

Completely Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Undecided	Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Completely Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Heading

These last few questions are for classification purposes. They will be used only to group your answers with others like yourself.

Question 21 - Choice - One Answer (Bullets)

Please indicate your gender.

- Male
- Female

Question 22 - Choice - One Answer (Drop Down)

Please select the category that includes your age.

- 17 or younger
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65 or older

Question 23 - Choice - One Answer (Drop Down)

Which one of the following best describes your marital status?

- Single, never married
- Married
- Living with partner
- Separated
- Divorced
- Widowed
- Prefer not to answer

Question 24 - Choice - One Answer (Drop Down)

In which industry do you work?

- Accounting
- Advertising
- Aerospace/Aviation/Automotive
- Agriculture, Forestry & Fishing
- Biotech
- Business Services - Hotels & Other Lodging Places
- Computer Hardware/Software/Internet
- Construction / Home improvement
- Consulting
- Education
- Engineering/Architecture
- Entertainment/Recreation
- Finance/Banking/Insurance
- Food service
- Government/Military
- Healthcare/Medical
- Internet (ASP)
- Legal
- Manufacturing
- Market Research/Marketing/PR
- Media/Printing/Publishing
- Mining
- Non-Profit
- Pharmaceutical/Chemical
- Research/Science
- Real Estate
- Retail/Wholesale Trade
- Telecommunications
- Utilities
- Wholesale
- Transportation/Distribution
- Transportation, Electric, Gas, Sanitary Services
- Business/Professional Services
- Professional Services - Other
- Other
- Don't work



Question 25 - Choice - One Answer (Bullets)

What best describes your level of education?

- Less than 9th grade
- Some high school
- High school graduate or equivalent
- Some college
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate or professional degree
- Prefer not to answer

Question 26 - Choice - One Answer (Drop Down)

Which one of the following ranges includes your total yearly household income before taxes?

- Under \$15,000
- \$15,000 to \$24,999
- \$25,000 to \$34,999
- \$35,000 to \$49,999
- \$50,000 to \$74,999
- \$75,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 to \$149,999
- \$150,000 to \$199,999
- \$200,000 and up
- Prefer not to answer

Question 27 - Choice - One Answer (Drop Down)

Which one of the following best describes you?

- White/Caucasian
- Spanish/Hispanic/Latino
- Black/African American
- Asian
- Pacific Islander
- Native American
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

### Question 28 - Open Ended - Comments Box

Thank you for your participation.  
If you would like to make any comments or provide feedback about the survey you are invited to do so in the box below.

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### Thank You Page

Findings from this study will be available upon completion. Please keep your invitation letter listing this web address which also appears below.

<http://schoolchoiceminnesota.blogspot.com/>

You may also print this screen for your records.

### Screen Out Page

Standard

### Over Quota Page

Standard

### Survey Closed Page

This survey has now closed.

Thank you for your interest.

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