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What's Good About Failing Schools?

Maika Malualelagi Tuala

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science

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ABSTRACT

What's Good About Failing Schools?

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Education policies tend to target failing schools that are often located in disadvantaged communities. However, the use of high-stakes testing to identify and punish failing schools has become increasingly controversial. An overemphasis on test scores to determine school quality has led to unintended consequences and overshadows other valuable school-based resources that parents feel meaningfully contribute to students' academic experiences. To better understand how low-SES parents describe their children's low performing schools, I interviewed 92 families in an under-served community. Through these interviews I illuminate the school-based resources that contribute to school quality. In fact, these additional elements were often more important signifiers of school quality for low-SES parents than were test scores.

Keywords: school quality, school effectiveness, high-stakes testing, education policy, education

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INTRODUCTION

Education policies tend to target failing schools that are often located in disadvantaged communities; however, the use of high stakes testing to identify and punish failing schools has become increasingly controversial. An overemphasis on test scores to determine school quality has led to unintended consequences and overshadowed other valuable school-based resources that parents feel meaningfully contribute to students' academic experiences. To better understand how low-SES parents describe their children's low performing schools, I interviewed 92 families in an underserved community. Through these interviews I illuminate the school-based resources that contribute to school quality. The resources parents identify are associated with greater learning opportunities for their children, even when these opportunities are not tied to higher average standardized test scores. In fact, these additional elements are often more important signifiers of academic quality for low-SES parents than are test scores. Therefore, the guiding question of our study is asking how parents in low-SES communities describe their failing schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education Policies Target Failing Schools in an Attempt to Improve Them

Most education policies and reform movements focus on “failing” schools, with definitions of failing generally centered on student scores on standardized tests. Policies aimed at improving “failing schools” tend to impose penalties for lack of improvement that range from budget cuts to school closures. Common across most school reform efforts is that they all target failing schools.

For example, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA 1965) acknowledged the effects of poverty on student achievement and was designed to make public

school funding more equitable. Thus, the ESEA had a specific function of directing more federal funds to schools in economically disadvantaged communities. However, the publication of “A Nation at Risk” made a public and persuasive argument that American public schools were failing and that corrective action needed to be implemented in educational policy (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). This created a general call for accountability and improvement that ultimately led to the upgrade of the ESEA into No Child left Behind Act (NCLB 2001).

The NCLB act, which is essentially an updated version of the ESEA, called for greater accountability from failing schools to improve or else face severe consequences. For instance, if schools failed to meet academic yearly progress (AYP) for more than two years, they were required under the law to give their students the option to transfer out to a higher-performing school. Additionally, failing schools were required to offer free services, such as afterschool programs, to struggling students, often without additional funding. The ultimate consequence for not reaching AYP was school closure or federal government takeover. As a result, an average of about 1,900 schools were closed for inadequate performance on standardized tests each year during the first decade of NCLB (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] 2015). Thus, NCLB required states to identify failing schools, based mostly on standardized testing, and place them under heavy-handed sanctions. As a consequence, 48 percent of the public schools in the US were labeled as failing schools by 2011 (Usher 2011).

Yet even when NCLB explicitly enabled millions of parents to remove their children from “failing” schools and send them to higher-performing schools, most parents (98 percent in so-called failing schools) did not do so (Rentner et al. 2006). Additionally, in spite of the fact that policies like NCLB provide the government authority to close schools down for poor

performance, the majority of those schools remain open, in large part because parents have kept their children in them. This perplexing phenomenon has led us to wonder how parents in economically challenged communities, often served by schools defined by laws and policies as “failing,” might diverge from traditional, test-based descriptions of school quality. For brevity we will refer to parents in economically disadvantaged situations as people who live in low-SES communities. To understand how parents in economically disadvantaged situations construct descriptions of the schools their children attend that might diverge from traditional or policy-based definitions, we first turn to a discussion of the controversial practice of using test scores to identify their schools as failing institutions.

Using Test Scores to Identify Failing Schools is Problematic

Those who propose using test scores as a means of identifying school quality make two assumptions that build on each other. The first assumption proposes that test scores are objective indicators of learning (Greene, Winters, and Forster 2003) and therefore school quality. Proponents suggest test scores are objective because all those who take the test are exposed to the same questions, and those who answer more questions correctly must have learned more than those who scored lower. Therefore, schools with higher proportions of students passing standardized tests must be higher quality schools because the test scores suggest their students learned more. Under this assumption, standardized tests are especially useful because they allow for a way to compare schools to each other and ultimately lead to greater transparency, forcing schools to be more accountable for their performance. The validity of the second assumption is dependent on the first. This second key assumption is that test scores can be used to make data-driven policy that will lead to desired educational outcomes (Amrien and Berliner 2002; Kornhaber and Orfield 2001). With an accurate indicator of school productivity, those who run

or govern public schools should be able to identify best and worst practices. Therefore, test scores can help decision makers identify good and bad curriculums and teaching practices (Au 2007) as well as to evaluate good and bad teachers (Milanowski, Kimball, and Odden 2005), principals (Heck, Larsen, & Marcoulides, 1990), and schools (Ladd and Walsh 2002). This could then lead to weeding out the bad from the good, including removing poor-performing personnel and schools, thus creating a more efficient and productive educational system. The NCLB act was largely based on the validity of both of these assumptions (NCLB 2001); however, these are both assumptions that have led to much debate and controversy. In the next two sections we review research that questions both of these assumptions beginning with the assumption that student achievement is a valid indicator of student learning and school quality.

Is Student Achievement a Valid Indicator of School Quality?

The main assumption that achievement-based evaluations have made was that average student achievement was a direct measure of school quality. However, this assumption is questionable because student achievement is so closely tied to non-school factors such as student background and prior achievement (Coleman et al., 1966; Fitz-Gibbon, 1996; Sammons, Mortimore, and Thomas 1996; Willms, 1992) and the neighborhoods children come from (Ainsworth 2002; Chase-Lansdale and Gordon 1996; Chase-Lansdale et al. 1997; Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov 1994; Kohen et al. 2002). Therefore, the difference among schools' achievement levels (high vs. low) is largely due to the populations they serve (high SES vs. low SES and minority vs. white) rather than any actions taken by the schools themselves (Coleman et al. 1966; Jencks et al 1972). It seems unreasonable to either praise or punish schools for student achievement that they did not help to create. Yet, education policies that focus heavily on aggregate scores on standardized tests continue to operate under this faulty premise.

Recognizing this disconnect, researchers have attempted to create more valid measures of school quality. One example is a value added approach that measures learning rates (Sanders 1998; Sanders and Horn 1998). Learning rates involve testing students at multiple time points to measure growth in skills and knowledge that takes place across schooling. For example, students might be tested at the end of kindergarten and then retested at the end of first grade. The learning rate is the difference between the two test scores. In our example here, if 30 percent of the kindergarten class passed the first test and then 60 percent of the same class passed the second test, the learning rate at the school would be 30. The learning rate could be compared across schools in the same way aggregate test scores could, but they would allow for the possibility of schools populated by underserved students taking less skilled students and contributing to greater growth for those students, even if those students' overall scores were lower than students from more privileged backgrounds (Downey, von Hippel, and Hughes 2008). Scholars arguing in favor of value added approaches claim that such approaches better measure school-based criteria and better parse out non-school factors (e.g., SES and neighborhoods) that usually effect student achievement (Sanders 1998; Stone 1999).

Learning measures have the benefit of trying to consider things that actually happened in schools instead of skills students brought to school with them. However, research suggests that 12-month learning measures were not completely valid (Downey et al. 2008). This is mostly because learning measures calculated on a yearly basis include the learning gains or losses that occur during summer breaks. Research indicates that students from affluent families have larger learning gains during the summer than low-SES students (Downey, von Hippel, and Broh 2004; Entwisle and Alexander 1992). This means that schools that serve more affluent populations may still show greater learning gains than low-SES schools without actually providing superior

educational opportunities in the schools themselves. Thus, learning measures were still influenced by other non-schooling factors.

Another way researchers have tried to capture school quality was by measuring school impact, or the “difference between the rate at which children learn in school and the rate at which they would learn if they were never enrolled in school” (Downey et al. 2008: 247). These effects are often colloquially referred to as seasonal effects or summer setback, with the idea that students who have more home resources will continue to learn while out of school (often for the summer break), while students with fewer resources may experience skill degeneration when school is not in session. Conceptually, measuring seasonal impacts isolates school effects while accounting for non-school effects.

Downey and colleagues compared these three measures of school quality (student achievement, learning rates, and seasonal impacts) and found that fewer than half the schools that were identified as failing according to traditional aggregated achievement tests would be considered failing when a different measure (e.g., learning rates or seasonal impacts) of school performance was used. More than half of the so-called failing schools actually had higher learning rates, as well as higher seasonal effects, than schools rated as passing by traditional testing methods (Downey et al. 2008). This means that many of the schools that were identified as failing could be argued to have stronger in-school effects on learning than schools with higher overall test scores, leaving the authors to question whether “failing schools [are] really failing” (Downey et al. 2008: 242) and whether aggregate test scores of student achievement are the best measurement of school quality. According to von Hippel (2009), student achievement may be the best measure in terms of reliability, but it is the worst measure in terms of validity. This is a cause for serious concern because it means that under any system that uses student achievement

scores to identify failing schools there may have been many high-impact learning schools that have been mislabeled as failing (Downey et al. 2008). This suggests the need to know more about other school characteristics that signify school quality, especially for the families and students who were most affected by the use of test scores to identify and punish “failing schools”. In this next section we review some of the unintended consequences of overemphasizing test scores in high-stakes decisions that disproportionately affect families and students who are served by schools that have been labeled as “failing schools” based on test scores.

Unintended Consequences of Overemphasis on Test Scores

Though research on measures such as learning effects and seasonal effects has called into question whether test scores are appropriate measures of school behaviors and quality, high-stakes testing continues to be used as a primary method of determining so-called failing schools. High-stakes testing links student achievement directly to various important outcomes such as student promotion and graduation, teacher evaluation, and job security for school administration and staff (McNeil 2000; Orfield and Wald 2000). This has resulted in a number of unintended consequences, often to the detriment of school personnel serving low-SES populations or to the students themselves (Jones and Jones 2003; Au 2009).

One example of such negative consequences was that high-stakes testing created narrow curriculums that did not prepare children for the modern workforce. Research documented how the overemphasis on testing has narrowed the curriculums that teachers use to educate children (Abrams, Pedulla, and Madaus 2003; Hill and Lake 2002; Jones and Egley 2004; Pedulla et al. 2003; Rentner et al. 2006; Rosenbusch 2005; Scott 2007; Taylor et al. 2001; von Zastrow 2004). This has led to “teaching to the test,” rote memorization, and dull lectures that create teacher-

centered rather than student-centered classrooms (Debray, Parson, and Avila 2003; Clarke et al. 2003; Gayler 2005; Hillocks 2002; McNeil and Valenzuela 2001; Paris and Urdan 200; Pedulla et al. 2003; Sleeter 2005). The problem with this approach to education was that it prepared children to take tests rather than providing them with the skills necessary to become marketable in today's society. Research indicated that today analytical skills such as critical thinking and problem solving were among the most valued skills in the market place (Liu and Grusky 2011). Teaching children to analyze decontextualized multiple choice problems is a lot different from giving them real life situations in which they are to identify the problem, discover possible explanations, and systematically reach an optimal solution, a teaching method based on experiential learning theory that mapped poorly onto typical standardized testing approaches (Kolb, Boyatzis, and Mainemelis 2000). Therefore, schools that focus on enhancing children's analytical skills through experiential learning could be great schools that prepare children for the market; however, standardized tests may not adequately capture such learning and thus drive schools away from such curricular approaches.

The focus on testing also created stress and burnout for teachers. Research documented that high stakes testing demoralized and put undue stress on teachers (Jones and Jones 2003; Nichols and Berliner 2007; Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas 2000). This is important to consider since job satisfaction is tightly connected to increase in productivity (Judge et al. 2001). Thus, if teachers are satisfied with their jobs they should be more likely to produce greater student learning. However, high stakes testing has had adverse effects on teacher satisfaction leading to "increased anxiety, shame, and loss of self-esteem" among teachers, particularly those serving low-achieving student populations (Smith 1991: 8; see also Johnston 1998; Johnston et al. 1995; Johnston, Afflerbach, and Weiss 1993; Smith et al. 1991). Other research finds that low-

achieving schools tend to have lower-quality teachers (Boyd et al. 2005), mostly because higher-quality teachers are more likely to leave lower-achieving schools (Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin 2002 2004). High-stakes testing, therefore, could have led to teachers' exit from "failing schools," creating a push-pull effect that pushed excellent teachers out of lower-performing schools and pulled them into higher-performing schools, in turn leading to greater educational inequality (Schultz 2014).

High-stakes testing also created biased against poor minorities. Research indicated, for example, that poor minorities were most likely to either dropout or be denied a high school diplomas due to high-stakes testing (Orfield and Wald 2000; Gillborn and Youdell 2000; Madaus and Clarke 2001; McNeil 2005; McNeil and Valenzuela 2001; Nichols, Glass, and Berliner 2005). Some researchers have found that low-SES and minority students were forced to drop out of their schools in order to increase schools' test scores (Nichols and Berliner 2007; Orel 2003). Other studies found that school administrators would strategically exempt low-performing minorities from state tests by placing them in special education programs (Figlio and Getzler 2002; Cullen and Reback 2006) or by suspending probable low scorers to prevent them from taking the test (Figlio 2005). High-stakes testing thus created a more hostile environment for many low-SES minority students where they were no longer viewed as students in need of help but rather as liabilities that could lead to lower teacher evaluations, administrative job demotions, or federal re-structuring.

In sum, high stakes testing reproduced inequality (Au 2008) by creating unintended consequences (e.g., narrow curriculums, teacher burn out, and bias) that systematically targeted the victims (e.g., low-SES minorities) of educational inequities (Orfield and Wald 2000). The public's hyper-vigilance over test scores has led to the overshadowing of other valuable school

characteristics that meaningfully contribute to students' academic experiences and learning opportunities. In the next section, we first review some of the school characteristics that parents in general valued, and then we focus more specifically on what school characteristics low-SES parents valued similarly or differently from their high-SES counterparts.

Other Valuable School Characteristics Contribute to Academic Experiences

Several of the objections to using high-stakes testing as the primary measure of school quality explicitly suggest that alternate characteristics of schools play important roles in students' academic experiences but remain unmeasured—and therefore underappreciated and potentially under-supported—in systems that emphasize test scores. A child's academic experience entails more than the information that they can repeat on a test; additional components might include class size, diversity of student body, relationships with peers and teachers, curricula, teacher qualifications, etc. (Schneider, Tesk, Marshall 2000; Kleitz et al. 2000; Weiherr and Tedin 2002). However, many of these valuable resources have been overshadowed due to policy makers' narrow emphasis on school test scores.

One broad school characteristic that most parents highly value, irrespective of their race or SES, is what they often refer to as academic quality. School choice literature documents that parents tend to identify academic quality as the most important school characteristic when making decisions about schools (Lee et al. 1996; Ball and Vincent 1998; Schneider et al. 1998, 2000; Kleitz et al. 2000; Goldring and Phillips 2008; Smrekar 2009; Stein, Goldring, and Cravens 2011; Tedin 2007). An important distinction was that parents did not refer solely to “test scores” when they discussed academic quality, as many educational policies have assumed, but rather emphasized a broader concept that largely reflected children's learning opportunities.

Yet, it is not clear what parents meant when they talked about academic quality. This confusion was exacerbated because researchers differed in the way they measured academic quality (Stein et al. 2011). For example, one way researchers measured academic quality was by asking parents if academic quality (or a similar phrase) was important to them in forced-choice survey data collection. Weiher and Tedin (2002), for instance, found that over 90 percent of parents indicated that “educational quality” was either “very important” or “important” to them when selecting schools for their children (Wieher and Tedin 2002: 848), but the problem with this measurement was that parents had no opportunity to explain what they meant by educational quality. In these cases, the idea of “educational quality” or “academic quality” was thus too broad of a conceptualization and provided little in the way of direction to people who run or govern schools. Another way researchers have measured academic quality was by creating composite quantitative indicators of academic quality. For instance, in a school choice survey of 748 parents in Nashville, Tennessee, Goldring and Phillips (2008) created a composite measure of academic quality with parental preferences for school test scores, academic reputation, and quality of teachers. While an improvement on the measures described above the problem with this measure of academic quality was that it limited parents’ conceptualizations to those three dimensions. Parents may have had other dimensions of academic quality in mind when they thought of good schools. Lee, Croninger, and Smith (1996) found that parents associated “a good academic reputation” with schools that “require[d] students to take a lot of classes in basic subjects” and that “offer[ed] a wide variety of courses” (Lee et al. 1996: 83). This suggests even more factors in how parents conceptualize schools’ academic quality. In sum, researchers have varied in their conceptualization of academic quality, ranging from broad labels to more specific measures such as the variety of courses offered by schools. Still, taken as a whole this research

documented how parents valued schools' various internal characteristics that they felt improved children's learning opportunities.

Another school characteristic that parents said they valued was teacher quality (Jacob and Lefgren 2007). While teacher quality may often be used in global labels of academic or educational quality, as above, when given the opportunity parents often made specific reference to teachers' abilities and qualifications. For example, Schneider et al. (2000) surveyed 1,600 parents across four districts in New York and New Jersey and found that a majority of those parents described "teacher quality" to be the most important characteristic of schools. In fact, the percentage of parents who valued teacher quality was more than twice those who valued high test scores. This evidence was further supported by a survey that found that 87 percent of parents wanted more information about the quality of teachers when considering schools (Public Policy Forum 1998). Interestingly, students agreed with parents about the importance of teacher quality for educational opportunities. Vanourek, Manno and Finn (1998: 188) found that most students thought good teachers were important in selecting their schools, defining good teachers are those who "teach it until I learn it" and "don't let me fall behind." In essence both parents and students alike viewed teachers as a key element in students' learning opportunities in schools. Few of the teacher characteristics parents and students list can be determined from standardized test scores, leading to the possibility that resources which people, who actually interacted with schools, valued were not being used in measuring whether those schools were productive or failing.

School Characteristics that Low-SES Parents Value

Because low-SES parents seldom remove their children from schools labeled as failing based on test scores (Rentner et al. 2006; Stein et al. 2011; Carnegie Foundation 1992), some policymakers attribute this behavior as being less involved in their children's schools than

affluent parents (Lareau 1987); these assumptions sometimes even extend to proposing that low-SES parents care less about their children's education. Others assumed that low-SES parents lacked the mental capacity to make proper schooling decisions for their children because they were less likely than their affluent counterparts to opt out of failing schools (Fuller and Elmore 1996; Wells 1996; Martinez, Godwin, and Kemerer 1993 1996), to attach significance to test scores (Hastings, Kane, and Staiger 2005), and to accept achievement ideologies that represent white middle class culture (Wells 1996, 1991).

However, contradictory evidence also exists for each of these claims. For example, although low-SES parents were less likely to opt out of failing schools (Fuller and Elmore 1996), they were more likely than their affluent counterparts to favor policies that allowed them to leave their neighborhood schools (Lee et al. 1996). Research also indicated that like their affluent counterparts, low-SES families attached significance to test scores (Jacob and Lefgren 2007) as well as teacher quality (Schneider et al. 2000). For instance, Schneider et al. (1998) surveyed 1,604 parents across four districts in New York and asked them to pick four things from a list of 11 attributes they considered to be important for their child's education. Results found less educated and Black parents were about eight percentage points more likely to say high test scores were an important attribute for schools to have than were white parents. Additionally, Kleitz et al. (2000) surveyed 1,100 parents in Texas who enrolled their children in charter schools and asked them to rate how important educational quality was in their consideration of the school on a four point likert scale ranging from "not important at all" to "very important." Low-SES and minority parents were more likely to say educational quality was important than wealthier and white counterparts.

Teacher quality was another characteristic that both high-SES and low-SES parents valued that is not accurately captured by test scores (Schneider et al. 2000; Phillips 2010). For example, in her seminal work, Lareau (1987) emphasized how both low- and high-SES parents viewed teachers as important resources in creating learning opportunities for their children. However, parents in the different SES categories differed sharply in how they used teachers as resources, with high-SES parents viewing teachers as hired help to assist them in educating their children, while low-SES parents viewed education as the teachers' sole responsibility. The effects this might have on how low-SES parents view school quality are important if they are reluctant to challenge or interact with teachers (Lareau 1987; Jeynes 2005; Fan and Chen 2001).

In addition to evidence that low-SES parents value test scores, broadly-defined academic quality, and teacher quality, other studies found a more expansive set of school characteristics that drive low-SES parents' assessment of their children's learning environments and opportunities. For example, Wells (1996) interviewed African American parents in Saint Louis and found that low-SES families placed high value on racial safety, meaning that they wanted their children in schools with a racial composition similar to their children. These parents described how their children were more willing to attend their local schools each day because they had a sense of belonging and were less distracted by racial issues and better able to concentrate on school. Such concerns are not readily signaled by student achievement scores. Additionally, a study of New Orleans parents' ranked preferences on school applications found that low-SES parents placed a premium on distance between home and school as well as on extended school days (Harris and Larsen 2015). The authors speculated that these preferences reflected practical considerations concerning the inflexibility of parental working hours and the need for children to get to school on time after parents had left for work or be cared for in the

school setting while parents were still at work. Such schools also expose students to more time spent in school learning rather than traveling or being forced to miss school due to transportation and work schedule issues. Again, school test scores cannot measure how these characteristics affect student's learning opportunities.

Additional research has found that low-SES parents rank school safety and disciplinary strategies as especially important (Schneider et al. 1998; Lareau 2011). In fact, surveys suggest that for parents in low-SES communities, these factors were more important than test scores (Lee et al. 1996; Harris and Larsen 2015). It may be possible that parents in troubled, underserved neighborhoods viewed safety and discipline as means to enhancing their children's learning opportunities because safe schools meant fewer worried about attendance and fewer distractions from classroom activities; more affluent parents, by contrast, may be able to make housing choices that ameliorate safety concerns, removing such criteria from their lists of desirable school characteristics (Smrekar 2009). A common factor among these alternative school characteristics valued by low-SES parents is that they lie outside of the sphere that policymakers have traditionally used to define good schools and failing schools. To what extent do test scores reflect these learning opportunities that parents' non-academic preferences may be signaling? Test scores likely do not measure—at least not directly—how safe classrooms are, how disciplined the students are, or how many afterschool programs the schools have, yet each of these characteristics directly or indirectly influences students learning opportunities, and each of these learning opportunities has been identified in survey research as one that low-SES parents tend to value more than test scores (Lee et al., 1996; Harris and Larsen 2015).

In sum, research documents various school characteristics that parents consider valuable to their children's learning opportunities, most of which cannot be captured by test scores.

Understanding how parents make meaning of learning opportunities within their failing schools is important, given that (1) 98 percent of parents who could opt out of failing schools remain (Rentner et al. 2006), (2) those who do opt out of failing school tend to send their children to equal or lower performing schools (Stein et al. 2011; Phillips, Hausman, and Larsen 2011), and (3) research suggests schools that are failing in terms of student achievement may not be failing with respect to other empirical measures (Downey et al. 2008). Knowing how low-SES parents assess what high-quality schools are, could illuminate our understanding of how to better judge effective schools in meaningful ways that could overcome some of the negative consequences on children's learning experiences that have been caused by overemphasizing student achievement measures.

Contribution/Significance of Study

One of the holes in existing research on parental conceptualizations of school quality, especially among low-SES parents, is the primary methodological and theoretical approaches: while survey researchers outline what characteristics high and low-SES parents value (Schneider et al. 1998; Kleitz et al. 2000; Weiher and Tedin 2002) and stratification theorists point to how these differences lead to ethnic and racial segregation (Wells 1996; Holme 2002; Saporito and Sohoni 2006), both remain silent on how parents in failing schools feel and think about their schools. They tend to assume that failing schools are ineffective schools, a point that has been countered in research (Downey et al. 2008; von Hippel 2009). Yet, little research has examined whether parents who send their children to schools that have been labeled as failing schools would agree with those labels. Clarifying how parents make meaning of their children's learning opportunities can lead to a more complex, nuanced picture of school quality that reflects experiences of parents living in communities served by "failing schools." It can also provide

insight that could help solve a puzzling phenomenon in that most parents who can opt out of failing schools don't and those who do opt out of failing schools send their children to equal or lower performing schools (Rentner et al. 2006; Stein et al. 2011). Parents' descriptions of their children's failing schools can illuminate why they remain or transfer to other "failing schools"—it is possible those schools have other qualities these parents value more than test scores. In other words, if this research uncovers such qualities, it might demonstrate that schools high in such qualities are not considered by parents to be failing. This insight can lead to improved policy interventions that can overcome some of the unintended consequences caused by high stakes testing by focusing more on characteristics that these parents describe as meaningfully contributing to their children's educational experiences and learning opportunities. Another possible result could be a better acknowledgement of the successes of otherwise "failing" schools. Through this qualitative research I examine the ways low-SES parents make meaning of their children's learning opportunities at their failing schools, and how these meanings may illuminate our perspective on failing schools. Therefore, the research questions that guides this inquiry are as follows: How do parents in low-SES communities describe their failing schools? What criteria do these parents value or critique in these schools?

Context

In order to examine how parents in low-SES communities describe their schools, we studied a small urban school district located in the Intermountain West. We selected this district because (a) it published school report cards (e.g., A vs.F schools) based on student achievement and offered parents the option to attend schools outside of neighborhood, thus eliciting elements of accountability and choice that dominate current educational policy, (b) it had a variation of school quality across schools in terms of published school grades, as well as (c) a diverse

population of students across schools both in terms of race and SES. These three elements were deemed indispensable to address this question because they each affect school quality and the way parents describe their schools (Saporito and Sohoni 2006; Smrekar 2009; Kleitz et al. 2000).

The racial composition of this district matched that of the city in which it was located with two fifths of the population being White, another two fifths being Hispanic, and the remaining being Polynesian, Black, Asian, Native American or of mixed ethnicity (U.S. Census, 2010). Although this district was located within a mid-sized urban city, it had considerable racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity, with a little over half of the students' eligible for free and reduced lunch. Despite there being substantial diversity within this district, there was a clear line that segregated affluent White schools in the North side of the district from the poor majority-minority schools located within the South side. The school district was essentially split into two parts, the southern side which had over two thirds of the population coming from minority and low-income households, with more than half being English language learners (ELL). Schools on this side of the district average a D+ school grade from the state school system. The northern side of the district, by contrast, had a majority white population with fewer low-income families and five times less ELL students than those in the South; schools in the northern part of the district also had an average B+ grade from the state school system (see Table 1).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

In this study we focused our examination exclusively on the southern region of this district. We did so for several reasons. First, it had the greatest concentration of poverty, with over four fifths of the students being eligible for free lunch. Second, it had the greatest concentration of minorities, and third, all of the schools in this part of the district were

considered failing schools due to low school grades or not meeting AYP. The combination of these three factors made the southern region of this district the ideal setting to examine how low-SES parents describe their “failing” schools. Additionally, because of the small geographic area of the district (12 square miles), low-SES families in the southern portion usually lived within a short distance of multiple elementary schools, and they lived within relatively short drive (average 8 minutes) from an A or B+ school, typically located in the northern region of the district. Thus, low-SES parents were exposed to a variety of schools that differed in terms of school quality, as determined by school test scores and associated grades, and had the option to transfer their children to any school within the district with relatively low transportation costs. This was important for our study since many studies that examined parents’ assessments about schools were often located in urban cities that lacked racial and socioeconomically diversity as well as access to higher quality schools (Wells 1996; Lee et al. 1996; David, West, and Ribbens 1994). It was also important because some researchers found that low-SES parents lacked the information necessary to assess schools (Ascher, Fruchter, and Berne 1996; Schneider et al. 2000; Sattin-Bajaj 2011). However, most of those studies were conducted in urban settings in which parents were mostly isolated in disadvantaged communities that lacked the racial, SES, and school quality diversity that we have in this setting. Therefore, for these reasons we derived our sample from the southern region of this district.

DATA AND METHODS

Sample

The school district provided the names and contact information for enrolled students for ten public elementary schools and one K-8 charter school within the district from 11 schools located in the southern area. Both undergraduate and graduate students involved in the project

participated in making phone calls to set up interviews and conducting the interviews. The youngest student in each family in each school was identified; students were then stratified into three racial groups (Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and Other, the latter of which was overwhelmingly White), and split into boys and girls and assigned rankings with a random number generator, with the goal of selecting the parents of four boys and four girls in each racial category in each school. Parents were offered a \$25 gift card as incentive for their participation. The research team made 686 phone calls, and after the elimination of numbers that were not in service or that were unanswered 310 parents were contacted and asked to participate in our study. Out of those 310, 92 households agreed to participate and were interviewed. Those who objected to participating in the study most often indicated lack of time or interest, as well as being skeptical of inviting strangers in their home to talk about their children's school. Hispanic respondents were overrepresented in the last category, which may be due to concerns about immigration documentation. This may have affected our sample by excluding more skeptical candidates. In the end we sampled 30 Pacific Islander families, 32 Hispanic/Latino families and 29 White families (see Table 2). We stratified our sample by race since parents' assessments of schools often differed by ethnicity (Kleitiz et al. 2000; Lee et al. 1996) and to allow triangulation within the data. Every attempt was made to have two interviewers conduct each interview, but a handful of interviews were conducted by a single interviewer. Interviews were most often conducted at the respondent's home, but a few were conducted at a local library, a public park, a school, or a fast food restaurant. Respondents for whom English was not their first language were offered the opportunity to do the interview in their native language; these interviews were conducted by trained interviewers fluent in the non-English language and later translated into English during transcription. The majority of respondents who chose this option spoke Spanish.

Respondents who primarily used English occasionally spoke a few phrases in another language, commonly Spanish, Tongan, or Samoan. These phrases were translated at the transcription stage into English by native speakers. Most interviews took place with mothers, although in a few cases both parents were present for the interview, and in a very small number of cases respondents were non-parental guardians (such as a grandparent).

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Interview Procedure

The semi-structured qualitative interviews allowed parents to voice opinions and experiences they have had with education in their own lives and within this specific district. Interviewers asked parent(s) a series of in-depth questions about their own experiences with school, their experiences with their child's school, and what they thought determined whether or not a school was "good." Interviewers also asked the parent(s) a series of questions about where they obtained information about the school their child attended, as well as how they evaluated the reliability of the source. Finally, interviewers presented parents with a series of 17 notecards with potential indicators of school quality or "good schools" that parents say are important based on prior research (Schneider et al. 1998; Kleitz et al. 2000; Goldring and Phillips 2008). These cards covered different topics that ranged from characteristics like safety, discipline, emphasis on culture to academic reputation. Parents were further asked to sort out which characteristics they did or did not consider and then to select the three most important school characteristics they viewed as essential to their children's learning environment. Parents were asked these questions both about their children's schools and what they considered ideal schools, though we note that in practice parents almost always made reference to their children's current schools, sometimes

in comparisons to other actual school. In sum, parents discussed the school characteristics they found important in the school their children were attending.

Field Notes

After each interview, the interviewer(s) recorded notes on the interview, describing characteristics such as respondents' jobs, education, socio-economic status (based on the living conditions, number of cars, number of people living in the house, and location in the neighborhood), income, how the interviewer was received, how well the respondent answered to questions or understood the questions, how their home appears (if interviewed at home), the race/ethnicity of the respondent, etc. This information was used to gather information not readily discernable in the interview transcript, particularly the participants' socio-economic status since we did not ask parents about their income due to its sensitive nature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Are Failing Schools Actually Good Schools?

Although all of the schools we examine in this study were failing schools according to state standards based on standardized testing, most parents we interviewed firmly believed the schools their children attended were good schools and explicitly described them as such. Parents' views were often shaped by structural reinforcements that enhanced their children's learning opportunities.

For example, Mariana, a Hispanic stay-at-home mother who was born and raised in the US, had a daughter who attended Aspen Charter, a new charter school that received an F grade after its first year of operation. When asked, "What do you think a good school is?" she described a good school as one that had:

A low classroom size. Updated resources like books, computers... a building that's not run down. And... a curriculum that is academically intensive but supported from the

administrative point of view so you know that your kids are learning a lot but they also have the personnel in place to make sure that all the kids are being supported in that learning.

Rather than referring to student achievement or school test scores, a common response by policymakers, Mariana pointed to physical, human, and curricular resources that shaped her daughter's learning opportunities as school characteristics that signaled to her that "kids [were] learning a lot" and therefore attended a good school. After describing what she defined as a good school, Mariana immediately qualified Aspen Charter as one by saying, "I think it's a good school...it had those things as well as being diverse. It was very important to us to have diversity."

Ashley, a stay-at-home mother, also described her son's C-grade school in a similar manner when she explained:

[The school had] really nice staff...The curriculum was really clear. Every day the expectations were clear. They were really welcoming of parents...They had high expectations of the children and they did great things with them. You know, some of the kids came in not speaking English. You know by October, November they looked like all the other kids pretty much. They worked really well with them and so we were really happy with how preschool had gone.

Like Mariana, Ashley also referred to certain characteristics that increased her son's ability to learn such as clear expectations, curriculum, and a welcoming environment. Interestingly, her comments did not refer to student achievement or test scores when identifying her son's C grade school as a good school.

Isabella, a Hispanic single mother who worked two jobs, a financial planner by day and a local gym manager by night, moved in with her mother after splitting up with her partner in order to have additional child care available. As a result, she sent her children to Hawthorn Elementary, a C-grade school in which her mother's home was zoned. When asked to describe a good school, she replied by referring to the school her children attended:

I think the teachers and kinda the programs that they offer usually kind of make me... want to be a little bit more to be at that school... [They have] a lot of extracurricular activities for the kids to do, the teachers have been teaching for a while, they have new ideas, the school calendar has good community...events,... and they have, like, active PTA's.

In describing her daughters C-grade school as a good school, Isabella too pointed out various elements (e.g., experienced teachers, programs, parental involvement) she felt were essential to her daughter's learning experience. Like most parents we interviewed, she did not mention school test scores or student achievement. Isabella, even went as far as preferring her C-grade school over "private schools where you have to pay for your kids to go" because she did not think private schools offered additional resources commensurate with their costs.

The finding that these parents overwhelmingly described their children's "failing schools" as good schools is surprising because it runs contrary to the political rhetoric behind educational policies that punish failing schools (NCLB 2001). These findings also suggest that policy makers and parents emphasize different aspects when they define good schools. Unlike test-based education policies, most of the parents interviewed did not focus on student achievement but rather focused on other elements they felt meaningfully contributed to their children's learning opportunities at the school. In the following section we will explore more in-depth the four school characteristics that low-SES parents most often referred to when describing their children's' good schools.

Structural Reinforcements that Enhanced Learning Opportunities

A deeper analysis of the elements parents described as essential to enhancing their children's learning opportunities revealed four common themes: (1) Schools provided specialized programs that addressed their children's needs. (2) Staff and administrators created a welcoming environment for their children to learn. (3) Caring, passionate, and creative teachers

increased their children's motivation to learn. (4) A child's enthusiasm to go to school signaled a good school. Together these four elements represent structural reinforcement that enhanced children's learning opportunities within these otherwise "failing" schools.

"Failing" schools provided specialized programs that addressed children's needs

Many low-SES parents in our sample who reported having children with some form of disability or special need, ranging from behavioral disorders (BD), autism, and ADHD to speech impediments and Tourette syndrome, explained that the schools their children attended were better equipped to handle their children's condition. In addition, many of these schools also received supplementary funding from the state to offer after school and summer programs to help improve student achievement. All of the schools in our sample were Title I schools, which meant the federal government offered additional funding for supplemental programs to be offered in schools with high concentrations of poverty. Many parents pointed to these programs as essential learning opportunities that made the schools the best environments for their children to learn.

For example, Dan, a technician who fixes ATM machines for a living, transferred his son from the northern side of the district to Cedar Elementary, a C-grade school, not because of its test score but because it had the best BD program in the district. He noted that if it wasn't for the BD program his son "would [not] be where he's at now. I think he would've got lost. I think he would've gotten labeled as a bad kid. You know 'cause he got diagnosed really early." For Dan, the availability of the BD program was a learning opportunity that was essential for his son's educational development and reintroduction into mainstream classroom. The academic quality of the school as a whole indicated by standardized test scores was immaterial compared to a specific program that could help Dan's own child.

Like Dan, Sarah, a local hair stylist whose son was diagnosed with high functioning autism, transferred her son to a failing school because it had a specialized program that could address her son's condition. She enrolled her son into Redwood Elementary (a C-grade school) because the "district psychologist suggested that that would be the best place in the area." Sarah pointed out the extent of specialized programs available when describing specific resources available to her son, who was "in the special education program over at Redwood Elementary... They've got the dog, a therapeutic dog there. Yeah, so they're really lucky." Like Dan, Sarah, was fortunate to have a program available for her son's school that could work with his disability and provide learning opportunities that could enhance his education.

Another Cedar Elementary parent, Becky, whose son has Tourette syndrome, described her son's experience at school:

At the school they invited a one of the youth ambassadors from the Tourette Syndrome Association [to] come in an' speak to the kids about Tourette syndrome... One day he [Son 1] was being teased an' most of the class stood up for [Son 1] an' Mr. [Teacher] actually rewarded the entire class for being, you know... supporting people an' stuff. He was a really good teacher for that.

For Becky, what made Cedar Elementary a good school was that it provided a supportive environment for her special-needs son to learn, and that this supportive environment extended to not only special programs for her son, but training for the entire school on interacting with students with disabilities. This was necessary because her son didn't "need help like with the education part." Instead, he needed the school to be flexible enough to work around his condition. For example, the school created a plan with her son so that he could signal to the teacher if he needed to "get out for a minute to go walk the hall, go to the bathroom, to calm down or you know." Becky said "it's things like that" which made Cedar Elementary a good school, even when she didn't have language to describe the non-academic opportunities: "It

wasn't just the education but it was more... you know." For Becky, Cedar Elementary provided more learning opportunities for her son than other, higher-performing schools. It may not have been beneficial for Becky to send her son to a higher-performing school where there was not support or resources that could tailor to her son's condition.

Leilani, a Polynesian mother who had two children with speech impediments, described Pine Elementary, a school that received an F from the state, as having a "great [emphasis] disability program [because] they have Special Ed where they work one-on-one with the students." This was important to her because her children were able to improve on their speech outside of the classroom and were slowly mainstreamed back with their classmates. She commented how her children felt "comfortable in their environment [and]...they don't have to feel like they're different...they don't feel like they're being singled out." The disability program was a crucial learning opportunity that this "failing school" provided to Leilani's children. Had Leilani focused on sending her children to a school with higher student achievement, she felt her children would have missed out on an important learning opportunity.

Other schools did not have specialized programs that focused on children with behavioral disorders. However, because many children with behavioral problems attend disadvantaged schools the teachers were often prepared to deal with such children. Don and Shela, for example, explained:

When [we] put [our son] over in [Aspen Charter] an' they actually seem to focus on him as a student an' put his, you know, ADHD second to last. Like they don't, you know, it's not the main focus on him. An' that's what I think that he needs. He needs to be treated like, you know, any other kid. But... you know, a good school is a school that's gonna take the time to teach 'em what they need to be taught. You know? But is also gonna be there to help 'em with anything that they're gonna need help with you know?

Don and Shela viewed Aspen Charter as a good school, despite its failing grade, because the school knew how to deal with their son's disability. The school's ability to focus on the children

rather than on their disruptive behaviors provided these otherwise marginal students opportunities to learn rather than ending up in the principal's office more often than in the classroom.

Sulia, a mother of four who worked at the local newspaper, was asked "For you, what is a good school?" She responded by describing her son's C-grade school:

There is a lot of programs for the kids that are English is their second language to help them reading and from that it's been 3 years right now over there and they all passed... And they said there is a fund at the school that help bring other people to come, like reading like extra time for kids that it's hard or having a hard time to learn.

For Sulia, the availability of programs that provided children, particularly ELL students, with more learning opportunities was a key element made her son's otherwise failing school a good school instead.

These findings suggests that many parents, particularly those with children with disabilities or special needs, viewed schools labeled as failing, by the state or other policy initiatives, as good schools because of the specialized programs that were available. Therefore, these programs provided additional learning opportunities for students in schools serving low-SES communities. This differs from research that describes schools in low-SES communities with limited resources and poor academic programs (Kozol 1991, 2005). It also calls into question educational policy that punishes low-SES communities by assigning heavy-handed sanctions and reduced funding to schools with low-student achievement (NCLB 2001; U.S. Department of Education 2009). If schools with specialized programs designed to help at-risk students attract such students, it may be a signal that they are performing well; however, adding such students to the general student body may depress standardized test scores, leading to these schools being punished for doing their jobs well. These findings suggest that low-SES parents value investments made in their children's schools, in particular investments that provide

specialized programs that serve their children's needs, and such programs increases their perception of the schools effectiveness.

Staff and administrators created welcoming environments for children to learn

Parents often described their interactions with staff and administration when referring to their children's schools as good schools. They used various cues such as the principal knowing the child's name, the ways the principal talked to them and handled their concerns, and even how the principals dressed. Several parents chose their children's schools because of the principal. They often described how the staff and administration affected the school's overall morale and learning environment.

For example, Jenny, who works as a computer lab assistant at a local elementary school, described her son's F-grade school, Ash Elementary, as a good school because of the staff and administration. Jenny expressed how she could tell the staff and administration were "there for the kids. They were... wanted the kids to succeed and wanted them. An' try to push them as hard as they could." For Jenny, the staff and administration were essential to creating an environment in which her children could be successful. This was important to Jenny because it enhanced learning opportunities for her son. Although her son's school was an F school, the staff and administration made it a good school for her children to learn.

Antonio and Eva also described the effect the staff had on their experience at Birch Elementary, a D-grade school. When asked why they sent their son to Birch Elementary they responded:

Eva: They care about the kids and one feels calm when they drop the kids off... At peace.

Antonio: Yeah and all the people who work there like the secretary, the office people they are all good people. And that's what we like about there.

For Eva and Antonio the personal relations they had with the staff signaled to them a school that “care[s] about the kids”. Implicit in their comments was the assumption that a caring environment would best enhance their children’s learning opportunities.

Like Jenny, Maria also enrolled her daughter in an F grade school. When asked what influenced her decision to send her daughter to Aspen Charter, she replied, “Just I think the friendliness of the staff there. Because I had gotten such a cold treatment at all the other schools that I contacted.” She further explained that the staff and administration “were so nice, and so caring and so welcoming ... so like right off the bat I felt so cared for, for me and my kids, I just felt so welcomed there..” Later that year the school grade came out and Maria and her husband received a letter from the principal informing them that the school had received an F grade. Maria said, “I was like, well it doesn’t seem like an F school to me. You know?” When asked why she felt that way she responded, “Just the whole experience I mean the interactions with the principal, the vice principal... and the kids there.” Maria’s positive interaction with the staff and administration signaled a warm and caring environment that could enhance her children’s learning opportunities, but at the same time signaled an environment where she was welcome to participate in her daughter’s education as well.

Selina, a Colombian mother who works as a nurse in the local hospital, also enrolled her son in Aspen Charter. She described how the new principal changed the overall quality of the school. She explained, “So it was a rough first year and then the second year a new principal came and it was a complete flip of how the school used to run things. And he has just been amazing. Unbelievable. Everybody knows everybody and they’re doing great.” For her the administration was central to the school’s learning environment, and in this case the administration turned a hostile and disorganized environment into a rich and welcoming place

for everyone. Many parents with children at Aspen Charter described how the new principal instituted Friday mornings as a time for “community circle” in which parents came to the school assembly and watched their children receive awards for exemplifying the schools values such as: “persistence,” “honesty,” and “hard work.” For many parents, the staff and administration were key to creating a learning environment for the entire school that included values parents wanted instilled in their child. In addition, if a principal was lively, enthusiastic, and caring, many parents found that teachers and other school personnel adopted those same characteristics, creating a more welcoming and effective learning environment for their children. For parents, a caring and lively environment greatly enhanced their children’s learning opportunities.

For example, Alofa, a Samoan stay at home mother, described how the principal changed her daughter’s school environment. When asked why she decided to put her daughter in Pine Elementary, an F-grade school, she explained, “I loved loved the principal. The principal made learning fun there an’ her vibe spread to all her teachers an’ they all wanted to make it fun. An’ then, so all my kids went there, every single one of them. I just kept them...” Alofa valued the learning environment this principal fostered so much that when her family moved out of the school boundaries she transferred all her children back to Pine Elementary—she actively chose to send her children to a failing school outside of their zone. She described the atmosphere of the school as one in which they “care for your child not only as a student but as a person an’ so I kept all of them there.” She mentioned how the leadership of the principal created that caring and personal environment that she wanted for her children, an environment which enhanced her children’s academic experience.

Leilani, a Samoan mother who worked as a parking attendant, also transferred her children to Pine Elementary because of the principal. When asked to elaborate on how the principal made a difference, Leilani replied:

With my kids it made a big difference. Only because it showed that this principal was active with her staff...Not only was she active with her staff, but she knows kids by names...So yeah, actual did make a bigger impact...

For Leilani, an active principle who knew her children personally made a big impact on her children's learning opportunities at the school. An active principal signaled to Leilani that the rest of the teachers at the school would not slack off but would be active as well; thus providing her children greater opportunities to learn. Many parents pointed out how the principal's passion for education and interest in their children trickled down to the staff and teachers and also reached their children.

Like Leilani, many parents emphasized how staff members' familiarity with their children made their failing schools good environments for their children to learn. When Jenny, a grandmother with three grandchildren attending Maple Elementary (a C-grade school), was asked what she liked about their school she immediately responded:

Mrs. Christina. There's a gal in the office an' she really is awesome... She's just always involved with the kids. She can match every child with their parent. I walk in there an' she knows my grandkids. She knows all three of my kids, you know? An' it's been years.

Jenny took notice that the staff knew her and her grandchildren. To her this signaled personal interest and investment in her grandchildren, and this translated her perceptions of an otherwise failing school into a good atmosphere for her grandchildren to learn. Therefore, a school with staff and administration that knows and cares for the students was perceived as a good school because it provided an environment that enhanced children's learning opportunities. In the minds of many parents, children were more likely to learn when they were valued and cared for by

school personnel.

Many parents mentioned the importance of the principal knowing their children's names. For example, Dan transferred his son to Cedar Elementary. When asked what he liked about his son's school, he explained, "Administration. They've an awesome one now. I mean they listen, they don't judge. You know, they get to know the kids." For Dan getting "to know the kids" signaled a good school. It demonstrated to him that they valued his son as an individual rather than a statistic. This implicitly signaled to him the school would provide an optimal setting for his son to learn. Similarly, Ashley, a White mother at Oak Elementary (C-grade school) noted that her son's principal knew not only her son's name but "by the third week of school she knows almost every child's name." Principals that knew children's names were described by parents as "passionate," "energetic," "open-minded," "caring," and "non-judgmental." Knowing children's names signaled to the parents the principal was "not just sitting in her office looking at a report or looking at test scores. She's active with her students. She gets out there and she does things," as Leilani described her child's principal. For these parents, an active principal who knew their children personally was most qualified to create a school environment that could enhance their children's learning opportunities.

These findings are in line with previous work on low-SES parents' emphasis on their children being valued as individuals. For example, parents' repeated appreciation for staff and administrators knowing their children's names may be similar to research on African American naming conventions (Lieberson 1984; Lieberson and Mikelson 1995; Fryer and Levitt 2004). Suggesting that African Americans created unique names so their children could be recognized as distinct individuals. African American parents may have wanted school personnel to struggle with their children's names as a means of insuring they will recognize and view their children as

individuals. Our findings show that low-SES parents, irrespective of their race, shared this desire for school personnel to know their children's names and acknowledge the parents as valued individuals when they visited the school. Staff and administrators use of students' and parents' names signaled to parents that schools took personal interest in their children, which to them suggested the school had a warm and caring environment. For low-SES parents, a warm and caring environment was a better indicator of the schools' quality than test scores. For most of these parents, a caring environment served as a proxy for a good school, and a good school was assumed to naturally produce greater learning opportunities.

These findings also run somewhat in contrast to Lareau's (1987:78) description of low-SES parents' interactions with school personnel as "stiff and awkward." It is possible that the parents in Lareau's sample would not have described their children's schools as good schools the way these respondents did, at least in part because of their interactions with staff. Still, our findings reflect some of the same underlying ideas: the low-SES parents in our sample described their children's schools as good ones because the principals running them were "open-minded" and "non-judgmental" rather than assuming these parents could not be full, active participants in their children's education. In fact, upon calling parents to participate in our study several parents immediately called their children's principals to check on the legitimacy of the study and to express concerns about how we obtained their children's information. One Hispanic mother finally agreed to participate after she confirmed the legitimacy of our study with the principal. These parents were comfortable and confident enough with their dealings with school administrators that they felt they could seek them out for additional information and support, and this was an important indicator of school quality to them. Our findings challenge the view that low-SES parents interact with schools differently than high-SES parents, at least in

circumstances where low-SES parents feel they and their children are welcomed and valued by school personnel. When low-SES parents feel they and their children are treated with respect by school personnel, they have positive reflections on the school that they use to assess the school as a high quality school, regardless of state-assigned grades or test scores.

Caring, passionate, and creative teachers increased children's motivation to learn

Parents' positive comments about their children's schools were often centered on teachers. Many parents in our sample described their children's teachers as caring, creative, and passionate about their work. Such teachers were viewed as essential to enhancing children's learning opportunities within the classroom. Often when a teacher was described as "a good teacher," the parents viewed test scores as non-essential to their children's learning.

For example, Leilani, whose daughter attends Pine Elementary (F-grade school), found test scores less important in defining a good school, because as she explains, it's the "teachers and staff themselves that make that test score matter." She says that if she only looked at the test scores she would have overlooked her child's school, "only because the teachers they don't... it's not that they're not focused on test scores. They probably are, but they are more concerned about the student being comfortable, and learning, and understanding than they are about them getting that right answer." For Leilani, test scores did not signal teacher's quality, but rather it was the teachers' concern for the child's welfare that made them good teachers and, by association, the schools they taught in good schools. A caring teacher who could make children's learning environment "comfortable" was viewed as an essential asset for providing children learning opportunities.

Like Leilani, many of the parents viewed whether or not teachers cared for their children as a priority in assessing schools. Therefore, a good school was one in which the teachers cared about the children. For example, Dayanara, a Mexican mother whose daughter attends Redwood Elementary (C-grade), was worried the first day she dropped her children off at the school because her children were English language learners. She waited outside her child's classroom window to observe how the teacher interacted with the children. She was impressed when she saw a girl crying and saw the teacher immediately take notice and ask the girl for a hug to calm the child. After a brief hug, the little girl quieted down and went on as if nothing happened. Dayanara commented, "You can tell that she's doing her job well." For Dayanara, a good teacher cares for the children in their classroom as much as the children's parents care for them. Another Hispanic mother, Selina, whose son attends an F-grade school, was asked to elaborate on she liked about her children's teachers. She responded by saying, "I like...how they deal with the kids...They are not like 'I'm the teacher you are the student, I'm up here you're down here.' They make them feel like a family. It's a family thing...I think it's awesome." Like Dayanara, Selina viewed a good teacher as a surrogate parent, one who makes the children feel like family.

Toa, a Tongan mother with two sons attending Redwood Elementary (C-grade school), moved to the United States from Tonga only 8 months prior being interviewed. In Tonga, Toa and her husband were school teachers, so she felt like she was in an excellent position to assess her children's new teachers in this school district. Toa viewed the teacher's interactions with her sons as she volunteered to help out in the classroom. She commented, "Like from ... my background as a teacher, once when I get in [the school] I can tell okay if you are safe." She further explained:

Like for me as a teacher...one thing I learned from my teachers in Tonga it's like, one word when I tell you this, that's it. So over here, it's like they explained it, the kids are

welcome to say what they think and then the teacher will go back and explain why she thinks this is the best.

For Toa, a good teacher was one that made the children feel welcome by allowing them to express themselves, but was also able to impart correct information and teach new skills while making students feel safe with what they brought to the classroom. Her children's teachers were very different from the teachers in Tonga, who were not easy to approach. She viewed the teacher's interaction with the children as refreshing, welcoming, and conducive to providing her children open learning opportunities.

Parents were keen to identify teachers who were enthusiastic, creative, and passionate, and they were just as keen to enroll their children in schools populated by such teachers. Stanley, a Pine Elementary parent (F-grade school), shared a similar sentiment. He explains how he likes "teachers who could help [Daughter] learn how to love to learn. And to keep her liking going to school." Stanley's comment reflects what most parents in our sample expressed, in that parents found it difficult to keep children interested in learning, especially in a formal setting like school. However, enthusiastic, passionate teachers could maintain their children's attention, which expanded their children's learning opportunities. Like many of the parents we interviewed, Stanley felt that the teachers' enthusiasm would rub off on his daughter and make her schooling experience enjoyable, thus making it easier to get him to school and excited about learning. Maria, a Hispanic mother, after her first encounter with her child's teacher described her as "an excited and happy person! You could tell that she loves kids and she was super nice throughout the whole school year."

For many of these parents, the ways good teachers pushed back against traditional measures of good schools were important. For example, Tiene, a Birch Elementary (D-grade school) parent, explained the reason why she liked her daughter's school was because she liked

the way her daughter's teacher "teaches them, she teaches it to where it's not boring, and they're [school administration] like, 'no, you need to just teach it and move on to the next thing.'"

Whereas the administration at Birch Elementary was focused on teaching to the test, possibly to increase low student achievement scores and escape the potential punishments associated with low performance, Tiene felt the teachers at Birch Elementary were more concerned with whether the material grasped her daughter's attention and whether her skills developed appropriately.

Jenny, an Ash elementary (F grade) parent, expressed a similar thought. When Jenny was asked why she chose her grandson's school, she said, "I wanted him to be at that school because, well, I loved the kindergarten teachers." When asked what she liked about the kindergarten teachers she said, "They were, you know, active in their lives an' they were creative an' it wasn't just here work sheet, work sheet, work sheet, work sheet, work sheet. They actually they did things with 'em an' they, you know, did different activities an' things with 'em." For Jenny, although her grandson attended a failing school by traditional measures, the teachers' pedagogical approaches were what made learning interesting, interactive, and fun rather than teaching a standard lesson and assigning work sheets. A lively and thought-provoking classroom provided her grandchildren greater learning opportunities and signaled a good school.

Past research paints failing schools as filled with low quality, burnt out teachers and restricted learning opportunities (Kozol 1991, 2005; Boyd et al. 2005; Hanushek et al. 2002 2004). However, our findings show how many low-SES parents described their schools containing caring, creative, and enthusiastic teachers who enhanced children's learning opportunities. Part of this description is due to the qualitative nature of our data which has allowed us a deeper looker into failing schools that goes beyond easily-measured indicators of teacher quality such as teacher certification, number of years taught, and student achievement

scores. While it is convenient for state and federal policy makers to determine teacher quality based on such measures because such assessments cost less time and fewer resources, the parents in our sample had a deep appreciation for teachers' efforts rather than their formal qualifications. Our findings suggest the need for government officials to use a more holistic approach when determining teacher quality as well as school effectiveness.

These findings also run contrary to research which indicates that low-SES parents tend to place greater value on non-academic factors and thus questions parents' abilities to select the best educational environments of their children (Carnegie Foundation 1992; Lee et al. 1996; Wells 1991, 1996). In contrast, our findings suggest that parents are very aware of academic factors, in particular teachers' classroom practices and traits that enhanced children's learning opportunities. However, parents and researchers may be looking at different outcomes when determining teacher quality. Many parents focused on teachers' interpersonal interactions with their children as well as their delivery of instruction. Parents were able to identify good teachers by the ways the teacher treated their children and the personal interest they took in learning about them as evident to them by simple gestures such as knowing the child's name or by the interesting activities teachers used to educate the children. These parental assessments were often linked to wanting their children to be excited to go to school, evidence of access to learning opportunities that are quite divergent from standardized testing approaches to measuring educational outcomes.

These findings also demonstrates that low-SES parents act much like high-SES parents when interacting with teachers (Lareau 1987). Lareau (1987) described how affluent parents were more likely to contact teachers and discuss academic matters while low-SES parents were more likely to mention non-academic matters such as the need to extend lunch time. In contrast,

the parents we interviewed often talked to teachers and met with them to become informed about their children's individual educational needs and even volunteered to help out in classrooms or on school field trips. To some extent this may reflect our sampling strategy; parents more willing to be interviewed might also be more willing to interact with their children's schools. The consistency of these findings across our relatively large sample, however, suggest that when low-SES parents believe teachers are creative and enthusiastic, this signals that the schools in which these teachers work are good schools, regardless of test scores or grades assigned by the state.

Children's enthusiasm for school signaled a good school

Many parents viewed their children's failing schools as good schools because their children were more motivated to attend school when they felt comfortable in their environment and enthusiastic about learning. Children's enthusiasm for attending school was viewed as another element that enhanced their learning opportunities. Parents in our sample were asked about their own schooling experiences, and they often drew on such experiences to make comparisons to their children's current schooling, pointing out that it is hard for children to learn if they do not want to be at school. Parents were keenly aware of the difficulties of making formal schooling an appealing activity, especially if that schooling took place in a poor educational environment. Therefore, they greatly valued schools their children were enthusiastic to attend as good schools.

For example, Mua, a Samoan father, described why he sent his daughter back to Aspen Charter, an F-grade school, after sending her to their neighborhood school:

We took [Daughter 1] out, but she just didn't like the schools she's going to, just socially. You know what I mean, and then it started reflecting on her school work and we put her back in Aspen Charter. And I keep saying this that socially she feels safe and comfortable at Aspen Charter, enough to the point where it makes a difference to what she's learning and how she's learning

Here Mua demonstrates that his daughter’s learning experience was significantly better when she attended school where she felt socially comfortable. Although Aspen Charter was a failing school according to the state, it was the better school for Mua’s daughter because she enjoyed going to school, which increased her learning opportunities.

This child-driven definition of good schools was common among the parents in our sample. Lemalu’s children also attend Aspen Charter, and he explained that his children were happy at the school, which he attributed to Aspen Charter being a good school. He said, “For me, Aspen Charter is good, [and] it shows. They come home...they explain to me what they did that day... So I decided, okay if they’re happy they will want to go to school.” Like Mua, Lemalu felt Aspen Charter was a good school because his children *wanted* to go to school. He further explained his reasoning for sending his children to a school they enjoy by saying, “I’m not going to be the one sitting in the classroom; they will be, and if they are not happy they don’t want to study. So that’s why I decided to take them to Aspen Charter. They like it, they like the school.”

Tama, who grew up in Western Samoa, knew the consequences of limiting his learning opportunities because of lack of interest in school. He lamented how he didn’t “push [him]self hard in school” because he didn’t find school interesting; as a result he ended up not going to college until 20 years after graduated from high school. When it came to sending his son to school, he didn’t want his son to make the same mistakes so he chose Aspen Charter because his son was “comfortable.” He further explained, “we’re trying to look for himself like if he’s happy in the school in the class he will learn...[Now] he’s doing really good in school.” Tama found that when his son was comfortable and happy in his environment, he learned and flourished because of his increased learning opportunities. Because Tama was pleased that his son was not

experiencing the same school problems he had in his own life, he attributed the improved experiences to Aspen Charter's quality.

Parents in other schools in the district share similar experiences. For instance, Melissa a Birch Elementary (C-grade school) mother, explained that she liked her daughter's school because it had a good "environment." When asked what she meant by "environment," she responded, "I mean like when kids go to school I think it should be a fun, great place for the kids. They want to go to school. I want it to be just inviting and I want the kids to say how much they love their teacher and how much they learned." For Melissa, a good environment wasn't just a place where kids have fun, but one in which they enjoyed learning. Catalina, another Birch parent, described how the school motivated students to do well on their homework by using coupons. If they did well they would get a coupon for a restaurant. Catalina explained

[That's a] good thing 'cause when you do these little things like that it inspire kids more to work more harder, you know? They wanna be better than the other one... That's a good thing that they do things like that to inspire kids to work more harder. At the school where, I never seen anything like that in the other school. An' we feel like he learn more, he wants to work more harder when he sees there somethin' up there, wants to be the best.

Like other parents, Catalina viewed how the school created an environment in which her children wanted to learn and work hard as evidence that the school was a good school.

James, a Walnut Elementary parent, captured this sentiment well, stating, "all I know is the outcome...the outcome was my son was happy to go to school. He was proud of his projects. He had friends." For him a good school was one in which his son felt comfortable and found pride in his work that motivated additional learning. James contrasted his son's experience at Walnut Elementary to another failing school in the district. He recounted, "At the other school he was becoming very reclusive, very sad, he would say I'm sick when he wasn't." For James, Walnut Elementary, enhanced his son's learning opportunities by making school something he

looked forward to.

For most low-SES parents, a good school was one which provided a welcoming environment that encouraged the love of learning. A love of learning enhanced children's learning opportunities by drawing them into the school more often. Although these schools were labeled as failing schools by the state according to student achievement measures, these parents viewed them as good schools. For these parents, a happy child was more likely to learn than one that was sad, and a child who was eager to go to school would be exposed to more learning opportunities than children who looked for ways to avoid school. Many of the parents made explicit contrasts between their children's academic growth when their children were attending schools they were happy in compared when they were attending schools where they were unhappy; they also contrasted their children's positive experiences to their own negative ones and were grateful their children were in "better" schools than they had attended themselves.

Father Knows Best: Are Parents Making Accurate Assessments of What a Good School Is?

Some researchers and policymakers may assume that these parents did not mention student achievement or test scores in their descriptions of a good schools not because they value other criteria that signal specific learning opportunities, but simply because they are unaware of the other, more objective assessment measures. Some research has argued that low-SES parents are less likely to use or respect test scores as true assessments of school quality because these parents lack information (Ascher et al. 1996; Schneider et al. 2000; Sattin-Bajaj 2011). For our sample, this was not the case: many of these parents were very aware of either their children's schools' test scores or that their children's schools were not considered the best schools in the

district. These parents simply did not value the test-based assessments as good indicators of school quality.

Some parents knew the test scores because they sought them out; others heard about test scores and related grades from school personnel. For example, Tama a Samoan immigrant who worked at a produce company warehouse, told us how “the grades that came out; like, I think Oak Elementary got a D. I think Aspen Charter got an F the first year. And a lot of people moved their kids out once they found out Aspen Charter got an F.” However, unlike those who left failing schools, Tama did not believe the test scores indicated important information about his son’s school. He explains:

And we were like eh, but Maika’i is at the top of the class. You know what I mean? And he’s learning what he needs to be learning and he’s above the state so does it really matter that the rest of the kids in the class aren’t learning where they should be at and can they really do that in a year?

Tama knew the test scores of Aspen Charter and that better-rated schools were available to him. He didn’t keep his son in a failing school out of ignorance, but rather because he observed independent evidence that his son was learning well at that school. These findings are similar to those observed for higher-SES parents in urban settings who are aware of their schools’ inferior test scores but feel that their ability to supplement their children’s education makes up for the school setting (Kimmelberg 2014). For both high- and low-SES parents, then, their individual child’s success and circumstances outweighed evidence from the state about school quality.

Maria and Juan also had children attending Aspen Charter and explained how the principal wrote a letter to all the parents informing them that the school received an F grade from the state. They described reading the letter carefully and were well aware of their school’s failing status. Yet, when asked about his reaction to the school receiving an F grade, Juan responded, “It just didn’t seem like an F school to me. I would have gave it a B+ or something.” In both of

these comments, the parents knew the test scores of their failing schools: they just rejected them and kept their children in the same schools.

Parents were also aware their children were enrolled in schools labeled as failing because of the stigma that the southern side of the school district had for its low school grades. For example, Hannah, a stay-at-home mother whose daughter attended another F-grade school, explained that she also knew that “the [South] side [was] the poor side and lots of parents drive their kids to the [North] side to go to good schools...I definitely think that there is that mentality that the [North] side is more well off.” Yet like other parents in our sample, she continued to insist that her own daughter’s school was a good school.

Other parents became aware of school grades and test scores because of their involvement at the schools. For example, when Ashley was asked where she got information about her children’s school, she said, “I attended SCC (School Council Committee) and PTA like I don’t know four, five times each of those per year an’ so I knew that there was probably information available.” Ashley also knew that her children’s school had low test scores by looking up easily-available information on the internet. However, she was not worried about her child’s school being designated as a failing school because of additional information about other criteria she gathered from her interactions with parents, teachers, and administrators at the school. Like Ashley, Toa also volunteered often at the school and gathered information about the school from her interactions with the teachers and students in the classroom. When describing her son’s schools, she explained:

R: Hey this is good, our school is good...I go and volunteer...At my kid's school... and I can tell they're doing really good.

I: What things did you notice that were good?

R: Because I would go to their classroom and I could see things I didn't see in Tonga.

I: What things?

R: Like...the computer. [Son 1] and [Son 2] they have individual teachers and then two to three hours of English with another teacher.

Toa and Ashley, along with many other parents in our sample, valued their own observations of learning activities, environments, and opportunities in their children's schools, and their personal experience with the schools often trumped the schools' low test scores or bad reputations. This extended to observations about student outcomes, as well. Don and Shela, who had children attending Aspen Charter, became aware of the failing school grad but said, "They didn't score great. But... I like the way that they teach over there an' I feel like he's (their son) doin' a pretty good job over there so...it doesn't bother [us]."

These parents were not uninformed about their schools as past research has argued (Ascher et al. 1996; Schneider et al. 2000; Sattin-Bajaj 2011). In some cases they were more proactive in finding information about their schools than high-SES parents. For, example, Holme (2002) explained that many of the affluent parents she interviewed did not visit their schools to check if the schools were as good as their peers had expressed. She also noted that very few of the parents even knew the test scores of their children's schools. Unlike the parents that Holme (2002) interviewed, many of these low-SES parents were aware of their schools' low-test scores. Although not all of the parents we interviewed knew school test scores or made personal visits to the schools, most of the parents were generally aware of that their schools were the lower performing schools in the district. Many of those parents who continued to insist their children attended good schools did so because they found test scores to be problematic.

Reasons Parents Problematize Test Scores

Our analysis found that a majority of the parents in our sample were aware of schools' test scores but actively rejected test scores as accurate indicators of school quality. Parents' objections to test scores were either related to their concerns about potential testing or for their accuracy in representing school quality.

Some parents found test scores problematic because they viewed testing as biased and unfair to those who are intelligent but not skilled at taking tests. As was true when discussing the importance of children being happy and content at school, these parents often spoke from their own experience in taking standardized tests. For instance, Sone, a Tongan father whose son attends an F-grade school, admitted that “test scores is something that my eye naturally gravitates to” because “it's easy to look at a school's test scores and say wow, they're doing really well and the students are learning, I want my kid to be in that environment.” Yet he acknowledged the limitations of using standardized tests to assess either individual students or schools because he never was a good “test taker.” Sone further pointed out “it goes back to the exposure and the experience I was talking about—that maybe was a given for someone who grew up in the larger culture, who was exposed to those things, but for me, it wasn't that common, so I couldn't relate to it. And I don't think it was a true and accurate measure of my knowledge, it's just I was never exposed to it.” Thus, Sone pointed out how tests were biased against Polynesian students like his children because these students were not exposed to certain subjects growing up in their communities, whether those communities were in the islands or in the United States. Tavita, a Polynesian father, shared the same concern when he stated, “Just ‘cause you don't pass a test doesn't mean you don't know what you're talking about. A lot of people freeze up or clam up when they hear it's a test...They know their information, it's all

there, they could tell you every inch of it but you say oh we're having a test and uhhhh I don't know if I'm doing this right you know? So test scores, I don't really think they mean a whole lot.”

Whitney, a White mother of a daughter, is in an unusual position to comment on the ways test scores do or do not accurately assess student learning, as she is a teacher at the same school her daughter attends. Elm Elementary is a C school according to the state, but Whitney rejects the idea that this grade reflects the learning that goes on in the school, in large part because she was critical of the items on the test itself. As a teacher, she was able to see first-hand some of the questions on the standardized tests that were administered to her students, who were 90 percent poor minorities. She comments:

R: They're not valid, for this population.

I: Can you expound on that?

R: Okay, so when they ask my students and they tell em a story about Girl Scouts and none of em have ever met a Girl Scout or been a Girl Scout or even know what the Girl Scouts are. And they're asking them comprehensions questions and they ask the school on the [north] side, where they're all Girl Scouts, those questions aren't really fair... 'cause they have no background knowledge... Or there was a question with like a yacht, they don't know what a yacht is.

Like Sone and Tavita, Whitney was quite aware of the difference between the life experiences of the children in the southern part of the district compared to those in the wealthier, Whiter northern side of the district and how test questions provided contextual advantage to children in the North. As such, she rejected the test scores as measures of school quality and focused, like other parents in the sample, on indicators of learning opportunities she observed in the school itself, like teacher creativity and a student growth.

Mariana, a Mexican immigrant whose daughter also attends an F-grade school, provided a compelling argument when she explained:

When you have...what are considered objective things that kids should be learning an' be able to be tested on, well whose importance has decided that these are the things that children should learn from these angles an' then they're being tested on it but they come from completely differen[t] backgrounds. You know? It's seen as being objective but it's really, really not.

Mariana's critique against the "objectivity" of tests was mostly founded on the point that test content is not neutral because its created based on what groups in power deem important and caters to those groups' experiences that most minorities may not be familiar with. She further explained that "Ethiopia[ns] ...have a completely different experience an' it's not just a... what should be considered a language barrier but they come from a place where like their strengths an' resources are completely different an' what is expected of 'em in a normal classroom." Like the other parents we interviewed, Mariana considered these critiques of testing reason enough to reject the failing labels applied to her child's school.

The common anxiety across most parents' concerns was that test content was biased in favor of privileged groups, particularly White or wealthy students. These concerns mirrored researchers who argue that high stakes testing creates bias against low-SES and minority populations (Orfield and Wald 2000; Gillborn and Youdell 2000; Madaus and Clarke 2001; McNeil 2005; McNeil and Valenzuela 2001; Nichols et al. 2005). These parents' comments also sided with researchers who argue that high stakes testing reproduces inequality (Au 2008; Orfield and Wald 2000). In other words, rather than being ignorant of test scores or what they may indicate, the low-SES parents we interviewed assertively joined those who reject the ways test scores create labels that reproduce privilege. Mariana demonstrated this powerfully when she stated, "I feel like test scores are really good example of how school is all about maintaining social structure."

Parents also problematized test scores by questioning whether test scores fairly represent schools efforts to improve, especially when working with populations who came to school with fewer resources than students in the more privileged northern segment of the school district. Stephanie, a single mother with two children attending Cedar Elementary (a C-grade school), rejected test scores because “[she didn’t] know how you can base the...student’s testing on teachers or the quality of teachers because it’s off how much the student really retains. And you can’t blame a teacher...I guess you could if they’re not teaching in a way that is right.” While acknowledging that teachers, and to the same extent schools, could be blamed for not providing effective learning opportunities, Stephanie suggests that testing can’t really identify teacher or school quality because students being tested bring so many outside influences to the school. She further explains, “You have to put some responsibility on the student too. I had test anxiety so I was not a good tester and I was good with everything else.” Stephanie sympathized with schools because test scores are based on “student” achievement not “school” achievement.

Dan shared Stephanie concern for using test scores to determine school quality. Dan explains:

You can’t take a group...an’ expect them to perform exactly the same. No matter, you could have ten kids go through the same let’s say math course for one day. At the end of the day you test them, they’re all gonna be different. So that’s why test scores to me don’t mean as much as maybe some parents...I’m not a big fan of pigeonholing kids.

Dan rejected test scores as an indicator for school quality because he felt they represented the knowledge the students brought with them to the course better than they represented the schools’ ability and efforts to teach students.

Jackie, a high school teacher with children attending Maple Elementary (a C-grade school), also questioned whether test scores fairly represented schools efforts to improve student

learning. When asked why she did not consider test scores when assessing her children's school she replied:

I think that being a low income area and a lot of immigrants the test scores aren't really going to say whether the school is doing good or bad because I think a lot of the students may just be a little disadvantaged with having to learn English an' so it's going to be harder for them.

Here, Jackie rightly pointed out that her children's school had a large percentage of ELL; in fact 61 percent of the children in Maple Elementary were ELL students. As she pointed out, these students were disadvantaged because they had the additional challenge of learning English in order to understand the questions on the test. However, although most parents we talked to knew this, the state school grading system that labeled these failing schools as A vs. F schools did not take the percentage of ELL students into consideration when assigning grades. Therefore, schools that served large percentages of ELL students were most likely to receive failing grades not due to instructional failures or a lack of learning opportunities, but because of challenges the students brought to school.

In sum, most of the parents we interviewed rejected test scores either because they thought the test scores were biased or because they thought test scores were not accurate indicators of school quality. These findings run contrary to research that indicated that low-SES parents placed a higher value on test score (Lee et al. 1996; Schneider et al. 1998; Jacob and Lefgren 2007), though the qualitative analysis we present here does allow us to dig more deeply into what those parents say they value. It is possible that if we had given our respondents similar surveys, they might also have marked that they valued test scores as indicators of school quality in a similar way. When we were able to probe more deeply, parents told us about their suspicions of standardized testing. Our findings also suggest that low-SES parents do not judge schools based on narrow measures of student achievement, providing more evidence for the perspective

that discredits student achievement scores as accurate indicators of school quality (Downey et al. 2008; von Hippel 2009; Au 2008). In rejecting student achievement scores as accurate indicators of school quality, these parents pointed to non-school factors as reasons for their schools' low performance, observations that are supported by a large amount of literature that suggest that student achievement gaps between high and low SES students are due to non-school factors (Coleman et al. 1966; Jencks et al. 1972; Downey et al. 2008).

Interestingly, our findings suggest that low-SES parents are not too different from high-SES parents when it comes to ignoring test scores when assessing schools if they think they have superior information from other sources. Holme (2002) found that high-SES parents did not use test scores to assess their schools' quality. Additionally, Kimelberg (2014) found that high-SES parents also rejected test scores when assessing public schools within an urban setting because they felt their own children's performance was better evidence of learning opportunities.

CONCLUSION

Our findings raise serious concerns for the way educational policies identify so called failing schools by using standard test scores as measures of academic achievement. If parents who are served by "failing" schools can describe multiple elements that enhance learning opportunities within their children's schools, as evident in this study, then there is a need to question the current system that many states are using to evaluate schools. Is it fair to label a school as a failing institution when the measures (e.g., student achievement) that are used to identify failing schools have been found to have major methodological (see Downey et al. 2008; von Hippel 2009) and theoretical flaws (Coleman et al., 1966; Fitz-Gibbon, 1996; Sammons et al., 1996; Willms, 1992)? Most parents in our sample, who were all served by schools that have

been labeled as failing based on educational policies (e.g., NCLB 2001) described in intricate detail several ways their schools enhanced their children's learning opportunities.

Our findings also suggest that some schools may be falsely labeled as failing institutions (Downey et al. 2008), which places undue stigma on educators and schools that serve low-SES communities. One way to avoid stigmatizing schools would be by using broader measures of school quality, including those that people who actually use those schools apply. Studies have provided several methods of calculating school quality by using measures other than student achievement, such as learning rates (Sanders 1998; Sanders and Horn 1998) or seasonal impacts (Downey et al. 2008 2004). Our findings suggest a number of other potential indicators of school quality, including parental satisfaction with teachers, administrators' success in creating positive school culture, and parental identification of important learning opportunities. It would benefit school districts and the communities they serve if valid measures were used to identify schools that need assistance in improving student learning.

One of the critiques of our study, actually sheds light on policy implications that could be applied to fairly assess and improve what are now labeled as failing schools. It is somewhat surprising that the picture these parents painted of the "failing" schools their children attended included desirable resources like new computers and buildings, special curriculums, and enthusiastic teachers, which did not match the lack of resources described by other researchers examining underserved communities (e.g., run down buildings, bad teachers, limited resources) (Kozol 1991, 2005). One of the reasons parents in our sample might have so readily identified a number of programs and criteria that increased their children's learning opportunities was because the school district we examined treated schools in the South differently than those in the North by placing more resources in the southern schools that needed them most. The

district made concerted effort to guide the more qualified administrators and teachers to the lowest performing schools. The district provided structural reinforcements, such as computers, playground equipment, renovated buildings, full-day kindergarten programs, free preschool programs, higher teacher pay, bilingual teachers, special education programs, and more experience administrators, to the lowest-performing schools concentrated in the southern part of the district in an effort to increase performance in those schools. To date, there is little evidence that such efforts have increased traditional measures of performance, as these schools still receive failing grades. However, our results show that parents who were served by these so-called failing schools reaped the benefits of this approach and highly valued many of these resources. Perhaps most important, they reported that they believed the schools that served them were good schools because their children were eager to go to school each day. This is a notable finding for populations that are often hard to reach or stigmatized in formal educational structures, and should lead to increased learning opportunities that may be related to increased performance in time. We suggest this district as a model approach to providing greater equity in resources to schools, in particularly those that serve high-poverty and minority populations.

In a relation to school quality our findings also speak to research on teacher and principal evaluations. From parents' point of view, a good teacher or principal is more than someone who can raise the student achievement levels of an entire school. Rather, the parents we interviewed emphasized caring and welcoming environments. If education policies continue to overemphasize student achievement scores over other factors that parents value, then those teachers and administrators who cater to low-SES parents' concerns (many which are not test related) are pulled between conflicting demands of different stakeholders (e.g., state vs. parents). With the state demanding higher student achievement, regardless of the demographic

characteristics of student populations, and parents who want principals to view their children as individuals rather than statistics that determine the administrators bonus check and job security, school personnel are put in a lose/lose situation. One way policy makers can address this dilemma is by including elements that parents value when assessing teachers and administrators as well as steering away from using student achievement measures.

In sum, educational policies may benefit by considering low-SES parents views about failing schools before they make high-stakes decisions. Continuing to do so would be like a doctor who prescribes a treatment without asking the patient where it hurts.

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TABLES

Table 1: School Characteristics

<i>School</i>	<i># Parents sampled</i>	<i>% Low income</i>	<i>% Minority</i>	<i>% English learners</i>	<i>School Grade</i>
<i>Birch Elementary</i>	7	96	91	63	<i>D</i>
<i>Elm Elementary</i>	8	94	89	63	<i>C</i>
<i>Redwood Elementary</i>	7	86	85	51	<i>C</i>
<i>Maple Elementary</i>	7	95	87	61	<i>C</i>
<i>Cedar Elementary</i>	7	89	81	47	<i>C</i>
<i>Ash Elementary</i>	9	96	89	60	<i>F</i>
<i>Hawthorn Elementary</i>	8	82	65	32	<i>C</i>
<i>Pine Elementary</i>	7	92	86	57	<i>F</i>
<i>Oak Elementary</i>	7	90	82	53	<i>C</i>
<i>Walnut Elementary</i>	5	86	60	27	<i>B</i>
<i>Aspen Charter</i>	20	65	88	36	<i>F</i>
<i>Sample Avg.</i>	8	84	81	54	<i>D+</i>
<i>North Side Avg.</i>	NA	28	26	11	<i>B+</i>
<i>District Avg.</i>	NA	62	58	50	<i>C</i>

Note 1: School grades represent 2013-2014 school year and based on percentage of students meeting state standards.

Table 2: Sample Characteristics

Characteristics	Number of Respondents
Sex of Respondents	
Male	32
Female	85
Marital Status	
Married/Cohabiting	73
Divorced	2
Single	17
Race/Ethnicity	
White	29
Hispanic	32
Polynesian	30
Black	1
School type	
Neighborhood school	60
Charter	20
Non-Neighborhood school	12
Nativity	
Born outside US	48
US born	44
Education	
Graduate degree	6
Bachelor	7
Some college	46
High School diploma	19
Less Than High School	14

Note 1: Based on household characteristics, our sample has 92 households with 117 respondents.

Note 2: Education is based on highest education completed in the household.

APPENDIX A

Note to interviewer:

- This interview guide is meant to be flexible. You should try to address all of the main questions (in bold) and use follow-up questions as necessary (in bullets). You do not necessarily need to ask the questions in the listed order, and you should feel free to ask additional questions that are relevant to the main issues raised here. This means that you should not expect any two interviews to look exactly the same, and you should feel comfortable following leads that move the interview in a productive direction.
- At the start of the interview, you must remember to promise confidentiality. Tell the interviewee(s) that we will never share their responses with anyone outside of the study team.

1. Get to know and build relationship with interviewee

[Note: Allow the interviewee to locate him/herself in relation to the interviewers. If possible, make connections, build a relationship.]

- Where are you from?
- Tell me about your family
 - o How many kids do you have?
- We are interested in multiracial families. Is your family multiracial?
 - o If so what races are within your family?
- Follow up question if family is multiracial:
- Given that your family is multiracial, when you enrolled your child in the school and they asked the race of your child what race did you identify your child as?
- Who lives here with you? (Grandparents? Siblings? Etc.)
- Did you grow up around here?
- Where did you go to school?
 - o How much school did you do?
 - o And your spouse?
- Are you working now? What do you do?
 - o And your spouse?
- [Tell a little about yourself]

2. Can you get us started by telling us about your own experience with school?

[Note: Assume that every interviewee has positive and negative experiences, and find out what they are.]

- What was school like for you?
- What did you like most about school?
- What did you like least about school?
- When you were young, what did you think school was for?
- What do you feel like you got out of school?
- Why did you stop/go on?

- How similar were your feelings about [elementary school, middle school, high school—whichever they haven't yet addressed]?

3. Which adult in your life would you say was most involved in making decisions related to your education when you were young?

[Note: We simply want to find out who was most influential—a parent, grandparent, aunt, etc. The next bold question should focus on this person.]

- For example, if someone at the school needed to talk to an adult about you, who would have been the best person to call?
- Or, who helped you with homework?

4. How was [the adult mentioned in #3] involved in your schooling?

[Note: Help the interviewee talk about the nature of this person's involvement in the interviewees' schooling. You should be referring here to the person identified in the prior question. We especially want to understand whether their support was at the school and/or at home, including what this support looked like (if there was support).]

- Were they involved at your school(s)? How?
- How did they support your learning/education at home?

5. Most parents want to send their children to a good school. What do you think a good school is?

- In general, what would you want your child to get from education?
- [If they have older children] Have any of these things changed from what you hoped for your older children?

6. Do you have children who are in school this year? What grades are they in, and where do they go to school?

[Note: This is only important to ask if it didn't come up earlier]

7. To make things easier, for our next questions think about [kindergartener] and her/his school. Can you talk to me a bit about why you decided to send [child] to [name of school]?

[Note: We're most interested in their experiences related to their kindergartener. Try to focus this and the remaining questions on that child.]

- Why did you choose it?
- What kinds of things did you consider?

8. What did you want [name of child] to get from this school?

9. Where did you get your information about the school?

- Did you talk to anyone? Who?
 - Did you get information from anywhere else?
10. Did you rely on any of these sources (just mentioned in question 9) more than others? Which ones and why?
[Note: The idea here is to encourage the interviewee to talk about whether and why they trust some sources more than others. The focus is on the sources, not necessarily the information they collected from these sources. We'll get to the information in the next question.]
11. Regardless of the source, what information was most important in making your decision? Why?
12. Notecards

We have here 16 note cards with characteristics of schools that many parents think are important. We want you to put them into two piles—one for characteristics that were more important when making a schooling decision for [child], and one for characteristics that were less important when making the decision.

I'm going to hand you these cards, one at a time. I'll say the name of the card out loud so that we know what we're talking about when we go back and listen to the recording.

As I hand you the card, would you just place it in one of the piles and talk about why you are placing it there rather than in the other pile?

[Note: Give the cards one at a time. Read each card as you hand it to the interviewee so that it can be recorded. Encourage the interviewee to talk about the decision to put the card where s/he did. After all of the cards are sorted, continue:]

Now, we'd like you to pick two or three of the cards from the "more important" pile that you see as the most important. Can you talk to us about those?

[Note: Collect these cards in a way that will keep the piles separate so that you can record which cards went in which pile when the interview is completed.]

[Here is a list of the cards:]

- Academic reputation of the school
- Test scores
- Quality of teachers
- Focus or theme of the school
- Classes better matched to student abilities
- Availability of specialized programs (ESL, gifted/talented, arts, music, etc.)
- Discipline at the school
- Emphasis on Polynesian culture
- Child's family members or friends attended
- Background characteristics of other students at the school (racial mix, SES, etc.)

- Close to home or work
- Transportation to or from school
- Safety
- Condition of the school building
- Class size
- Resources at the school (computers, libraries, availability of textbooks and workbooks, school supplies, etc.)

13. Wrap up

After the interview

Immediately after the interview, perhaps on the ride home, turn on your recorder and respond to the questions below as best you can. (Create a new audio file and be careful not to delete the interview file.)

- Who was present during the interview? Be sure to differentiate between who was answering questions and who was present but not answering the questions.
- What is the interviewee's gender?
- What is the interviewee's career (if any)? Note also if the interviewee is a student, stays home by choice, is unemployed, etc.
- How old was the interviewee(s)? Make an estimate if you are not sure.
- Who lives at the residence where you conducted the interview, and what are their relationships to each other? Is it a two-parent (male and female) household with kids? Does a grandmother or grandfather live in the home? Etc.
- How well do you think the family is doing financially? Look for signifiers—size of house and yard, number and type of car(s), style and quality of furnishings (vinyl vs. tile floors, laminate vs. granite counters, artworks, etc.)
- Dictate any field notes based on your visit. Describe how the interview went, how the interviewee received you, any concerns that arose, and the like.