

EVERYDAY POLITICS OF SCHOOL CHOICE IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY¹

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Abstract

School choice is promoted as one strategy to improve educational outcomes for African Americans. Key themes in Black school choice politics are empowerment, control, and agency. Using qualitative interviews with seventy-seven poor and working-class Black parents in Chicago, this article asks: How well do the themes of empowerment, agency, and control characterize the experiences of low-income African American parents tasked with putting their children in schools? Also, what kind of political positions emerge from parents' everyday experiences given the ubiquitous language of school choice? I find that in their own recounting parents focused on finding a quality school while experiencing numerous barriers to accessing such schools; parents expressed experiential knowledge of being chosen, rather than choosing; and parents highlighted the opacity, uncertainty, and burden of choice, even when they participated in it quite heartily. I argue that their stories convey limited and weak empowerment, limited individual agency, and no control. Their perspectives conjure policy frameworks and political ideologies that require a discussion of entitlements and provision, rather than choice.

Keywords: School Choice, Education, Black Politics, Charter Schools, Public Schools, Chicago

INTRODUCTION

At the center of many popular and scholarly discussions of Black progress is the role of education (Darling-Hammond 2004; Payne 2008). The discussions about improving the quality of education for African Americans all begin from the same premise that the current situation is unacceptable. No matter if the measure is achievement on standardized tests, grade retention, rates of suspension and expulsion, or college graduation rates, African Americans (and Latinos) lag behind Whites and Asians (Aud et al., 2010; Harris 2010; Schott Foundation 2012). Augmenting the statistics, qualitative studies portray the severe inadequacies of and challenges within the schools that many Black children attend (Anyon 1997; Noguera 2003). Thus, there is consensus on the clear need for reform. It is in posing the classic question “Where do we go from here?” (King 1968), however, that debate emerges (Henig et al., 1999; Orr 1999).

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There are myriad answers to the question of how to improve educational outcomes for African Americans, including: racial and/or economic school integration, equalizing school funding, imposing rigorous accountability systems, and investing in pre-school, just to name a few. These approaches are not mutually exclusive and they are all being employed to some extent or another. This article explores school choice as one prominent contemporary school reform measure.²

Perhaps if the research found unambiguously positive results for Black children as a result of school choice then there would be less debate, but instead the outcomes are mixed and/or weak (Center for Research on Educational Outcomes 2013; Cullen et al., 2006; Deming et al., 2014; Gleason et al., 2010; Rouse and Barrow, 2009; Slaughter-Defoe et al., 2012). Hence, school choice is a contentious political issue both within and outside of the Black community. Pro-school-choice advocates observe the crisis in education for Black children and argue that entrepreneurial and dedicated leaders outside of the traditional public school bureaucracy can do a better job. Some of these proponents build on a Black Nationalist tradition of community control, and see choice as a way to set up autonomous organizations and to give parents and children greater leverage in their own educations. Key words in Black pro-school-choice discourse—and in the scholarly research on this sector—include empowerment, control, and agency (Scott 2012, 2013a).

There is always a gap, however, between political ideals and the implementation of actual policies (Watkins-Hayes 2009). Therefore, in this paper I explore the politics of school choice by foregrounding the everyday experiences of low-income African American parents facing the decision about where to send their children to high school in the city of Chicago. Studying the subjects of school choice—that is, those who are subjected to school choice and those who are the actors in choosing schools—reveals political consciousness(es) fomented by those experiences. I ask if the themes of empowerment, agency, and control characterize the experiences of low-income African American parents tasked with putting their children in schools.

I find that the parents I interviewed focused on finding a quality school. They valued schools that were safe and structured, and that taught skills that would prepare their children for jobs or college. While they had a clear vision of what they were looking for, they were equally clear that their access to good options in Chicago was limited by socioeconomic barriers of their own and external barriers inherent in the choice process. Parents also conveyed important experiential knowledge that often it was the schools that chose students, rather than the other way around. Moreover, choice itself was a significant burden on top of other daily struggles. Overall, their stories convey limited and weak empowerment, limited individual agency, and no control.

I also ask what kind of political position emerges from parents' experiences. Listening to parents highlights the opacity, uncertainty, and burden of choice, even when they participate in it quite heartily. I argue that Black low-income parents involved in school choice offer a grounded counter narrative to Black pro-choice discourse. Their desires for a quality and accessible education—and the burdens they experience in doing the work of choice—conjure policy frameworks and political ideologies that do not prioritize choice, but require a discussion of entitlements and provision instead.

The paper is organized as follows. First, I define school choice, review the literature on the roots of school choice strategies in the Black community, and offer a theoretical framework for the political themes of empowerment, agency, and control that are expressed in Black pro-school choice rhetoric. Second, I discuss my methods that build on qualitative studies of everyday Black politics, including the small literature on Black parents making school decisions. Third, I introduce the data and

the Chicago educational context. Fourth, I present empirical findings that foreground the issues of quality and access, elucidate the burdens that families face in doing the work of choice, and problematize the locus of choice. I interrogate the data using the political themes of empowerment, agency, and control that animate Black pro-choice rhetoric. I conclude by articulating the direction for school reform that is suggested in these interviews.

BLACK POLITICS AND SCHOOL CHOICE

The term “school choice” encompasses a number of concrete policies, including: No Child Left Behind mandates that allow families to opt out of failing public schools and enroll in other public schools; inter- and intra-district open enrollment plans that allow students to attend public schools outside of their designated attendance areas;³ charter schools that are funded by public dollars but governed and administered by non-profit or for-profit organizations and are given greater flexibility in hiring, operations, and curricula; monetary vouchers (or scholarships or tax-credits) for families to send their children to private schools; and an innumerable list of alternative public school designations (e.g., magnet schools, options schools, and innovation schools) that require some parental or student purposeful action for enrollment. The most contentious forms of school choice are vouchers and charters because they are the most autonomous from elected and appointed public sector leaders and education professionals despite receiving public dollars (Ravitch 2013; Scott 2011).⁴

All of these school types are contrasted with “traditional” or “neighborhood” public schools, which are: funded by tax dollars; designated for students living within a defined attendance boundary; accessed without application or special effort; and staffed, managed, and governed by people who are accountable to an appointed or elected public body. In general, school choice “restrict[s] government’s traditional ability to assign children to a particular school, shifting this authority to parents. This transfer of power often is accompanied by efforts to diversify the types of schools made available to children” (Fuller et al., 1996, p. 2). The effort to restrict the role of government is consonant with a neoliberal market model of education (Buras et al., 2010; Chubb and Moe, 1990; Dawson 2011; Dixson 2011; Lipman and Haines, 2007; Noguera 1994; Spence 2012). “From this perspective, the educational system can only be improved via greater deregulation and privatization of large bureaucratic systems and the simultaneous infusion of competition, high-stakes incentive systems, and supposed unfettered consumer choice” (Wells 2002, p. 6).

In real politics and policy, there is significant heterogeneity of Black public opinion and political behavior regarding school choice. While Black legislators (DeBray-Pelot 2007), voters (King and Smith, 2008b; Kunkle 2011; Raspberry 2003) and organizations (NAACP 2010; Bond 2002) have shown opposition to vouchers and charters, there is also evidence of Black support (Bositis 2004; Corcoran and Stoddard, 2011; Education Next 2012; Tate 2010), including high demand by Black students (Grady and Bielick, 2010; Stoddard and Corcoran, 2007) and over-representation of Black educators as charter school principals (National Center for Education Statistics 2011–2012). Finally, insofar as President Obama represents a voice within the Black political chorus, he is a vocal supporter of charter schools (The White House 2013), while disavowing vouchers.

This complexity means that the tidy labels of liberal, radical, progressive, conservative, and neoliberal are not always helpful for characterizing the Black political landscape around choice (DeBray-Pelot et al., 2007; Pedroni 2006).⁵ Scholars have

documented that school choice rhetoric emanates as much from the “conservative” actions of Southern White segregationists who fought the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision by setting up all-White private schools with public state grants (Bonastia 2012; MacLean 2009) as from the “progressive” or “radical” activism of independent Black school founders and African American teachers and parents who fought for community control as a way to achieve a learning environment that did not pathologize their children (Forman 2005; Hochschild and Scovronick, 2003; Holt 2000; Lee 1992; Robinson 2004; Slaughter-Defoe et al., 2012; Stulberg 2008; Wells et al., 1999; Yancey 2005). Alongside these activists are free-market advocates inspired by the writings of Milton Friedman (1962) who promote the logics of innovation through deregulation, accountability, competition, and choice as the solution to poor performing schools. Given the ill fit of traditional political labels, school choice advocacy in the Black community is often characterized as convening “strange bedfellows” (Bonds et al., 2009; Carl 1996; Dougherty 2004; Pedroni 2006).⁶

Despite heterogeneity, the central and foundational role of Black radical leadership in promoting school choice is well documented. James Forman (2005) begins this history with the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964 and the schools established by civil rights activists to counter under- and miseducation in public schools. Lisa Stulberg (2008) discusses the Council of Independent Black Schools and the New York-based African American Teachers Association in the late 1960s and 1970s. These organizations—inspired by Black Nationalist rhetoric—challenged the political focus on desegregation and instead worked to build excellent Black-controlled institutions both inside and outside of the public sector. About the community control movement in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn, Jerald Podair (2002) writes: “Community control also promised to end the political marginalization of the average Ocean Hill-Brownsville citizen, by creating an alternative route to empowerment” (p. 80).

Stulberg (2008) charts the legacy of these various Black political movements in the founding of a charter school in Oakland by Black leaders who “explicitly viewed themselves in the tradition of community control and other school-based movements for African American freedom and social justice” (p. 112). There are many other examples of charter schools (and voucher advocates) that have no relationship to free-market business interests or conservative politicians, but are instead spearheaded by local African-centered educators and passionate teachers frustrated by traditional public schools (Pedroni 2006; Wells et al., 1999; Yancey 2005). Below I elaborate the key themes that this literature documents as motivating Black support for school choice.

THEMES IN BLACK SCHOOL CHOICE ADVOCACY

While many themes can be highlighted in the rhetoric of this broad array of school choice advocates, some themes are more salient in Black school choice politics than others. For example, Black pro-school-choice advocacy is not rooted in free market ideology of privatization, deregulation, and competition, and thus these terms are not common tropes in this context. Instead, empowerment and control are central organizing ideas in popular Black school choice discourse, and “agency” is a scholarly concept that is frequently used to analyze school choice. I define and discuss each of these terms in order to generate questions that test if they align with parents’ experiences.

The idea of “control” comes directly from calls by Black parents, neighborhood activists, and educators for “community control” of schools in the 1960s and 1970s (Forman 2005; Podair 2002; Stulberg 2008).⁷ At the individual level, the word control focuses on parents’ ability to control where their children will attend school, thereby

controlling what they learn in school. For example, on the front lines of the school choice battle in Milwaukee, Black supporters exhorted Black parents to attend legislative hearings on the issue, saying: “Let them look at your beautiful Black faces and say you don’t have a right to control where your children go to school. Let them stare you right in the eye and say ‘we know what’s best for you, and what’s best for you is to send your children to failing public schools while we send ours to private schools’” (Holt 2000, p. 74). Building on such declarations, Wells and colleagues (2002) identify parental control as one of the three central themes in the charter school movement. The authors contend that support for charter schools emanates from “[t]he perceived need to give efficacious parents more choice and more control and an understanding that they should be treated more like ‘customers’” (p. 353). To test the salience of the political theme of “control” among parents, I ask: Has control of student placement been shifted from school districts to parents?

The invocation of “empowerment” also comes directly from the language of Black school choice proponents (Scott 2013a), and it also has both individual-level and collective registers.⁸ For example, the mission statement of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO)—a national organization with several local offices that lobbies for school choice—is “to increase access to high-quality educational options for Black children by actively supporting transformational education reform initiatives and parental choice policies that empower low-income and working-class Black families.” Here, families, not communities or Black people collectively, are ostensibly empowered through their ability to choose. Yet, in another context, Howard Fuller—former Black Panther, former Superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools, and founder of the BAEO—appeals to a sense of collective empowerment when he writes the following:

There was a time when it was “progressive” to fight the bureaucracy. There was a time when some of us carried signs that said, “Power to the people.” What is interesting is that some of the folks who used to rail against the bureaucracy now are the bureaucracy... Now we’re supposed to believe that magically, because they’re in charge, the people’s interests are going to be met. I believe the people’s interests are going to be met only when the people are empowered to fight for their interests (Fuller 2004, p. 3).

Here, “the people,” not just individual families, are empowered through choice and their ability to voice their interests and have those interests met. This face of empowerment is firmly rooted in Black Nationalist and Black Power ideologies of the 1960s and 1970s (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967; Podair 2002).

Yet neither of these statements defines empowerment. The scholarly literature on empowerment offers what I describe as weak and strong versions of the term. The weak version equates empowerment with choice itself. For example, Fuller (2000) concludes a collection of chapters on charter schools with the following: “This book’s contributors discovered two distinct forms of parental empowerment. The first rests with the simple ability to choose. Whether it be among working-class parents in rural Minnesota or affluent parents in southern California, the ability to opt out of a mediocre neighborhood school or to avoid homogeneous private schools is certainly a form of empowerment” (p. 248). Hence, in the weak version of empowerment, the privileging of parental preferences and decision making is itself a form empowerment.

Strong definitions of empowerment require more than just the exercise of choice. Marion Orr (2003) defines empowerment as “political access and responsive politics” (p. 256). Archon Fung (2004) further elaborates the concept in his discussion of empowered participatory democracy. Fung argues that democratic participation can

be defined as empowered when “discussions generated by these processes determine the actions of officials and their agencies” (p. 4). Hence, the strong version of empowerment requires that parents have *access* to political actors and institutions, that those actors and institutions are *responsive* to parents, and that parents have a *determinative say* in decisions being made by officials or agencies.

Therefore, a test of the weak form of empowerment lies in the exercise of choice itself. Were parents able to avoid schools they did not like in favor of more acceptable options? To test the strong version of empowerment, I ask if there is evidence in the data that parents had access, were responded to, and/or had a determinative voice in placing their children in high school.

Finally, “agency” is not a term that comes directly from pro-school-choice politics, but is instead an analytical concept employed in studies of school choice (Pedroni 2005; Rofes 2004). It is a term that scholars have long endeavored to define and clarify (Cohen 2004; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Hunter 2013; Sewell 1992; Stephens et al., 2011). Colin Campbell (2009) offers a helpful synthesis and clarification of this literature by delineating two faces of agency. The first is what he calls the “power of agency,” which is the capacity and intention to direct one’s actions in a specific situation or toward a specific task, a “voluntary purposive action” (p. 410). Furthermore, the power of agency “is about implementing will” (p. 417). It is not about the external responses or reactions to one’s will, nor is implementing one’s will the same thing as realizing or achieving some change in existing material or structural circumstances, which may ultimately never happen. Instead, the power of agency is when individuals take control of themselves for some desired (material, spiritual, aesthetic, or political) purpose. Black infrapolitics (Kelley 1993)—whereby everyday actions, however clandestine and of short duration, are directed towards taking back a bit of labor power, carving out a bit of personal time, or performing bodily freedoms of movement and dress—is an example of the power of agency. These behaviors exemplify the capacity to voluntarily direct one’s actions with purpose without overtly or detectably disrupting law, custom, or economic arrangements.

Campbell’s second type of agency brings in considerations of social structure and impact. “Agentic power,” Campbell (2009) argues, is “the ability of individuals to act independently of social structural constraints” (p. 416). Acting without deference to normative, legal, economic, or institutional constraints is always detectable and is often a direct demand or challenge. Therefore, agentic power is as much about what actors do as about the “effect of their actions” (p. 410). Short of wholesale revolution, agentic power at the very least includes “power over” (p. 409) the situation, including realizing an impact on the actions of others or an impact on the structural context. The notion of agentic power echoes one of the core components of empowerment: that one’s actions or decisions are *determinative*, thereby exhibiting power over others, institutions, or structures.

I consider these two types of agency in my analysis of the interview data. If parents experience the power of agency—or what I am calling individual agency—they should report voluntarily implementing their will and directing their actions with some purpose. If parents experience the stronger form of agency—agentic power—then they should demonstrate an ability to act independently of, in resistance to, or have an effect on the workings of the educational institutions with which they interact when making school decisions.

METHOD

Research using ethnography, interviews, focus groups, and archives has shown the importance of everyday interaction and talk in the Black community for generating

political identities and ideologies (Harris-Lacewell 2004; Johnson 2008; Kelley 1994; May 2001; Moore 2010; Pattillo 1998). Black feminist epistemology similarly insists on the “connection between experience and consciousness” (Collins 2000, p. 24) and uses Black women’s lives and narratives to illustrate “how political consciousness can emerge within everyday lived experience” (p. 209). Harris-Lacewell (2004) argues that “everyday talk is as important as formal deliberation to producing creative and just governance” (p. 2). People develop their political consciousness by sharing stories and reflecting on personal experiences with institutions and their representatives. Talking makes audible people’s goals, preferences, and desires; it allows for feedback on feelings, emotions, and logics that may have been inexpressible in an actual encounter or interaction. Hence, everyday talk (and performance) yields an everyday politics that is not explicitly goal-directed or aimed at persuasion, but rather enunciates grievances, interests, and aspirations, which could be the beginnings of a political position or the material for political action.

Following Cathy Cohen’s (2004) contention that there is “political potential” (p. 39) in everyday acts of deviant behavior that “are not necessarily made with explicitly political motives,” (p. 30), I use the framework of politics (as opposed to, say, disadvantage or rational choice or parenting) to analyze the experiences of Black parents choosing schools. Doing so recognizes their position as important stakeholders in these debates and puts their perspectives in play with those who employ the more visible politics of advocacy, lobbying, and law making. While the research was not designed to investigate parents’ political views, an important feature of qualitative research is its generative nature and its ability to push the investigator in unexpected substantive directions. Listening to parents’ voices made it apparent that they had plenty to say about school choice and that their perspectives constituted an experience-based politics. Attending to the mundane and everyday realities of Black folks is as important a tool for understanding Black politics as analyzing the election of Barack Obama or uncovering the frames and content of Black protest movements.

A few other studies have used in-depth qualitative interviews to explore the everyday experiences of Black low-income parents making school decisions. This research documents the high priority that parents give to education; their strong desires to put their children in good schools; and the dearth of information and resources at their disposal (Bell 2009; Cooper 2009; Rhodes and DeLuca, 2014). In assessing the political valences of these parents’ stories, Camille Cooper (2009) finds that the Black women she interviewed in Los Angeles evinced a “politics of educational care” and represented the “power of positionality” (Cooper 2005 pp. 379, 174), while Pedroni (2005) argues that Black mothers fighting for school vouchers in Milwaukee exhibited a “subaltern agency” that left “the door open for rearticulating marginalized families’ educational concerns to ultimately more effective, meaningful, and democratic education reform” (p. 85). I engage these studies further in the analysis of the data.

DATA

The data for this article come from qualitative interviews with seventy-seven African American parents, guardians, and parent figures (sixty-nine of them women) who had children entering high school in Chicago in the Fall of 2007.⁹ A close-ended survey was also administered to gather easily quantified and tabulated responses. At the time of the interview in the summer of 2007, their children had completed eighth grade and had decided on a high school to attend; hence these data are retrospective accounts of the process. I conducted the interviews along with a graduate student and two undergraduates. All of us are women who identify as either African American or multiracial.

The goal of the interview was to generate a free-flowing conversation with parents about placing their child in a high school. While ethnographic observations are the best way to observe unedited conversation, in-depth qualitative interviews aim to approximate the same rapport and informality. We conducted interviews in the local library, the respondent's home, or another place of the respondent's choosing. The questions were designed so that respondents would share their experiences and not just their opinions. For example, we asked parents: "You told me about some of the people you talked to about this decision. Could you give me a few examples of conversations you had?" We asked parents to walk us through the process and timing of their thinking about their child's transition to high school. We focused our questions on what parents and students wanted in a high school, how and from whom they got information, what they knew about the high school landscape, and their emotions during the process (frustration, enjoyment, confusion, excitement, etc.). The interview was designed to last roughly forty-five minutes in order to respect respondents' time, but, as is common with qualitative interviews, they ranged widely in length from thirty to ninety minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed.¹⁰ Although there were multiple interviewers, I use the pronoun "I" in this article since it is based on my own analysis, interpretation, and writing.

In order to understand how parents faced the high school decision process, I recruited parents from one traditional public high school (Neighborhood High) and one charter public high school (Charter High), located in the same predominately African American neighborhood in Chicago, and thus drawing primarily from the same geographic pool of parents and children. This framework allowed for the comparison of parents who had obviously participated in the choice process by entering their children into the citywide lottery for Charter High with parents who may or may not have exercised a choice to attend Neighborhood High. For example, in an early visit to a Neighborhood High summer orientation session, I told parents I was interested in how they "chose" the school for their child. Some parents responded that they had been "assigned" to Neighborhood High and had not chosen it. Hence, very early in the research I modified the framing of the study around the idea of "deciding on a high school." Also, in analyzing the data, it became clear that focusing on differences between Charter and Neighborhood High parents risked missing areas in which they shared similar sentiments. The findings presented in this paper emerged when comparing (rather than contrasting) the two sets of parents.

Table 1 shows the socioeconomic profile of the parents interviewed from the two schools in this study.¹¹ Charter High parents had higher incomes and more education, and were more likely to be employed and married than Neighborhood High parents. While they were relatively advantaged when compared to Neighborhood High parents, Charter High parents were disadvantaged compared to the general population of families in Chicago and the United States. On average they had just over a high school education, 35% were unemployed, and their median family income was barely over the poverty threshold for a family of four. Charter High parents also had more resources at their disposal, such as access to the internet and a car, and church membership. While Charter and Neighborhood High parents exhibited variation in their school preferences and experiences of the school choice process—and I mention these differences in the analysis where relevant—the goal of this article is not to contrast the two sets of parents. Instead, the data analysis revealed that Charter and Neighborhood High parents shared similarities in their emphasis on quality and access, experienced similar barriers and constraints, and similarly found the process confusing and burdensome. I consider the sample as a whole in order to understand what collective political sentiments emerge.

Table 1. Socioeconomic Characteristics of Parent Interviewees

	Neighborhood High	Charter High
N	28	49
Median Age	40	42.5
Median Education	12 years	13 years
Median Income (midpoint of income ranges)	\$5,000	\$25,000
Percent Unemployed	71%	35%
Has Internet	43%	63%
Owns Car	23%	65%
Attends Church	57%	81%

SETTING

So as not to betray the identity of the two schools, I do not present precise statistics on the schools or the neighborhood in which both schools are located, but rather present sketches of each school based on publically available data from Chicago Public Schools (CPS). When the interviews were conducted, the student body of Neighborhood High was over 75% African American and over 75% low income as defined by qualifying for subsidized lunch. Only a small minority of Neighborhood High students met state benchmarks on standardized tests, less than half graduated, and at least one-third of the student body was chronically truant. Less than half of the students felt the school provided a “safe and respectful environment.” Admission to Neighborhood High was determined by attendance boundaries. If parents in the attendance area did not enroll their children elsewhere, they had an automatic seat at Neighborhood High.

Charter High’s student body was also predominately African American and predominantly low income. In 2007, the school was too new to post standardized test scores. Data from 2012 show that while Charter High had more than double the proportion of students as Neighborhood High meeting or exceeding state testing standards, that proportion was still below 50%, and below the citywide average. Charter High compared favorably to Neighborhood High and the Chicago high school average in its daily attendance, graduation rate, and college attendance rate. Also, a large majority of Charter High students felt the school was “safe and respectful.” Hence, Charter High had generally better performance outcomes than Neighborhood High, but still struggled in the area of standardized tests. Admission to Charter High was done by random lottery, which is the predominant but not uniform practice across the country. Any child in the city of Chicago was eligible to apply, although the school only recruited in the immediate surrounding neighborhood. Charter High did not request or consider information about grades or test scores. Names were picked randomly from amongst all those who submitted their applications by the deadline until the freshman class was filled, and leftover names populated a waitlist. Charter High received roughly twice as many applications as it had open slots and parents had to confirm their choice of Charter High in order not to be assigned to their neighborhood high school.

These are just two examples of school assignment and choice in Chicago. Like many urban school districts, Chicago allows intra-district choice (i.e., students can attend public schools outside of their designated attendance areas but within the district). In 2012–2013, CPS administered 145 high schools, including forty-six charter

high schools that enrolled roughly a quarter of all high school students. There are no school vouchers in Illinois.

Finally, Chicago is a poor performing school district overall; it is in the lower tier of urban school districts across the country (see Figure 2, National Center for Education Statistics 2013). It is also on “Academic Watch” status by the State of Illinois (Illinois State Board of Education 2013). In the 2007–2008 school year (the freshman year for the children of the parents I interviewed), only seven of its high schools met federal Adequate Yearly Progress standards (Chicago Public Schools 2013a), and 60% of the high schools with sufficient data were rated as “Level 3,” the lowest rating in the CPS performance evaluation system (Chicago Public Schools 2013b). This context of an abundance of low-quality school options is important for understanding how parents approach school choice in Chicago and other comparable cities (Hastings and Weinstein, 2008).

If parents want to choose a school other than their assigned school, then they must do some research because there is significant variety in the types of schools available. CPS’s overview of the school enrollment process specifically endorses three steps: “Research, Choose, and Register” (Chicago Public Schools 2013c). For the 2012–2013 school year, school types and programs at the high school level included: neighborhood, career, charter, contract, fine and performing arts, International Baccalaureate, magnet, military, selective enrollment, small, and special education. In any one school building, there may be multiple schools and school types with distinct names, hours of operation, curricula, and administrators, and each with its own admissions process. This complex constellation of choices is by no means unique to Chicago (Boston Public Schools 2013; Brennan 2011; Lubienski et al., 2009; Weininger 2014; Whitehurst and Whitfield, 2013).

FINDINGS

My conversations with parents about deciding on a high school began with the general question: “You said you first started thinking about where your child would attend high school in [Month]. Could you tell me about your early thoughts? What made you start thinking about the high school decision? What were you expecting about making this decision?” It did not take much for parents to open up about their journeys. Common across parents in both schools was their desire for a quality school, their frustrations with gaining access to such a school due to a range of barriers, and their experience that the power of choice lay with the schools and not with them. In the following sections I give evidence for each of these points using select quotations that represent dozens of similar quotations.¹² Then, I discuss parents’ exhaustion by the process, even if they got what they wanted. Throughout, I analyze their comments with respect to the political themes of empowerment, control, and agency.

A Quality School

Schools are complex organizations with expansive goals (Ladd and Loeb, 2013) and thus defining and evaluating school quality is complicated and contentious, even for experts (Favero and Meier, 2013). Despite areas of variation, most parents in this study prioritized putting their child in a quality school, and they measured school quality by evaluating aspects of educational content, order and structure, and school safety (Schneider et al., 2000). Clarifying what parents want out of schools is a first step in elucidating their politics about education.

Most parents began with very general statements. “If the school could provide a quality education, that was just our first and foremost [consideration],” said one

Charter High mother, using the word “quality” as if its meaning were self-evident. The word parents used most to talk about educational content was “academics,” often without any elaboration, as in the following exchange with Mr. Gordon, the older brother/guardian of a Charter High student:

“Okay, so what were your early thoughts about choosing a high school for Joseph?” the interviewer asked Mr. Gordon, erring by using the word “choosing” instead of “deciding on.”

“Academics,” was the response.

“Like, what about it?” was the probing question.

“Academics,” was again the plain response.

Relentless, the interviewer asked again, “Like, what were you looking for as far as academics.”

Mr. Gordon, pushed to elaborate, responded, “In other words, his goal is to go to college.”

For Mr. Gordon and other parents, “academics” was synonymous with college and a quality school featured a curriculum that prepared students for college. As one Charter High mother described it, “I want the kids to really have enough knowledge so when they go to college they don’t have no gap. That’s why I was focused on the level of the school.” Ms. Proctor, a Neighborhood High grandmother, also had college aspirations for her grandson and decided on Neighborhood High because her own son had graduated from there. She reported, “Neighborhood did empower [my son] to leave high school and he went to college. So I felt like my boy I have now, that he can do the same thing.”¹³

Another content-related measure of quality emerged from the interviews with parents who had a child with special needs or a learning disability. “I wanted to make sure they have a tutoring program. Because I know he might need a little help in math, or algebra or whatever,” said one father who was pleased that Neighborhood High offered such services.

Mr. Nelson, a grandfather who, along with his wife, was helping his daughter raise her son, was more elaborate about his grandson’s learning challenges:

His reading, he got to learn how to read, like, in a book without stuttering along the words. Just read it. He have to take time. He’ll know the word but he read slow. And I used to tell him that he have to read more so he can pick it up. I have him reading the newspaper articles. Me and his grandmother, you know. So he needs improvement on his reading, not to learn how to read but to learn how to tell a story reading it without just stumbling over the words. And Neighborhood [High] say they have a program for that, a tutoring program. A hour or two hours extra in school ain’t going to hurt him.

The Nelson’s were evaluating potential high schools based on the availability of extra help, and they promoted school as a positive place, not a place to be avoided. Even though Neighborhood High was not their first choice, they were pleased that it offered a supplementary reading program. Parents at both schools talked much more about instructional assistance or detailed curricular interests as components of quality than things like teacher credentials or a school’s test scores (Cooper 2005; Weininger 2014). Although test scores were a frequent topic of conversation, they were seen as an exclusionary mechanism, not as a measure of school quality.

In addition to what would be taught in school, most parents stressed that a good curriculum was useless without structure, or an orderly school atmosphere with an intentional school culture, clear rules and routines, faculty and staff enforcement, and high levels of student compliance. Structure was important because nearly all parents had a strong belief that a student's effort in school was at least as important as the school itself in determining a child's outcome (DeLuca and Rosenblatt, 2010). In other words, parents did not see schooling as a one-way street, but were instead big believers in the personal responsibility of their children. As one Neighborhood High mother remarked, "I think *every* school got some bad in it, you know what I'm sayin'? Just, you got to get down and do what you got to do." Parents believed that structure and order facilitated students being able to "do what they got to do." A Charter High mother elaborated on this point, contrasting what was not a quality school with what she wanted for her child: "[In] most high schools all the kids is running in the halls and not getting a education. I want him somewhere where he can get a good education at." Similarly, a Neighborhood High father considered the possible distraction of unruly classmates. He wanted his daughter to "concentrate on her schoolwork instead of laughing and playing a lot." A school where students were undisciplined and disorderly ranked low on structure and curtailed students' abilities to learn.

Closely related to structure, but much more general in character, was safety. Nearly all parents mentioned safety concerns when considering high schools for their children. A quality school was a safe school. Ms. Tinley, a mother of an entering Charter High student, included safety among the top things about which she gathered information when comparing schools. She shared her thoughts from early in the decision-making process:

Some of the questions [I asked when considering schools], is there violence, you know, is there fighting in the school? Outside the school? What is the, you know, safety, what's the protocol? Is police always in front of... I would prefer police not always be in front of a school, you know. But if it has to be, then, okay, but are they there to just provide safety or are they there because they think something's gonna happen?

The list of questions that guided Ms. Tinley's review of possible schools was topped by the issue of safety. While school safety may be assumed in some contexts, in Chicago it is a variable that parents must assess and about which they must gather information (Kleitiz et al., 2000).

Like Ms. Tinley, other parents made observations about violence in and around schools as ways to exclude them from consideration. Ms. Boyd, a Charter High mom, described what she saw at the high schools near her home, saying, "The two that's closest to us, when I travel past them there's fighting and police, you know. I'm like, 'Oh my God, I don't want to deal with that'." Another mom, Ms. Price, was frustrated that her foster-daughter was assigned to Neighborhood High because of what she saw everyday out of her front window, which faced the street where Neighborhood High was located. She began, "If you could just sit and watch in the evening about 2:45, you would see why I feel this way. It's just terrible." "What happens at 2:45?" I asked. "When the kids get out of school, the police are everywhere," she answered. These accounts all illustrate the need for parents to do a complex reading of police presence in and around Chicago high schools (Hirschfield 2008; Monahan and Torres, 2010; Rios 2011; Shedd and Hagan, 2006). They rarely read such a showing of law enforcement as a sign of a quality school.

Parents' search for a quality school must be put within the context of the available options. "Choice" refers to the preferences and elections of parents and students, whereas "options" are the array of schools towards which parents direct their choices.

Courtney Bell (2009) emphasizes the importance of options—or what she calls available “choice sets”—in shaping inequalities in final school placement. In her study of a large Midwestern school district, she finds that “poor and working-class parents did not choose from schools that ranged in quality. The schools they selected from were relatively uniform: failing, nonselective, and free” (p. 206). The parents I interviewed also saw their options as limited, and the data on the poor performance of Chicago Public Schools presented earlier support their perspectives. For example, even though her daughter would be attending Neighborhood High, one mother said: “I told her that she needed to go to a good high school. And believe me when I say Neighborhood was not on the list.” A Charter High mother, who reported not being very optimistic about her options, but was satisfied with Charter High, was equally blunt: “I was just looking at the schools that I might wanna consider out of, you know, the lesser of the evils because I didn’t like any of ‘em. But I’m like, well, outta these I have to pick something.” Hence, parents tried to optimize quality within this landscape of suboptimal options, as well as limited time and resources (Schwartz et al., 2002).

What do parents’ discussions of school quality convey about their everyday politics regarding school choice? It may seem elementary, but given assumptions about apathy and ignorance among low-income and Black parents (Lightfoot 2004), it is important to recognize that parents readily articulated what they wanted out of schools, and what they wanted to avoid. Cooper (2005) reports similar findings in her study of low-income Black mothers in Los Angeles, who opine that “a school must be safe and orderly and have clean facilities, caring and effective teachers, strong student discipline, and a convenient location” (p. 182). Bell (2009) finds that nearly 70% of the poor and working-class parents she interviewed mentioned academic reasons as significant in their school decisions. Political positions are based on these expectations about the character and content of public goods since demands cannot be formulated without a conception of the desired outcome. Hence, at the foundation of these parents’ politics is a desire for quality educational options and a consciousness of concrete components that make for good and for bad schools.

How did parents fare in placing their child in a school that in some way corresponded with their definition of quality? As reported in Table 2, 100% of Charter High parents reported having chosen Charter High, a signal that the school satisfied at least some of their quality criteria (although this does not necessarily mean it was their first choice). In comparison, 19% of Neighborhood High parents reported choosing it, while 38% allowed the geography-based school assignment process to transpire. The remainder (43%) said they were assigned to Neighborhood High despite preferring another school to which they had applied, a data point that obviously speaks to the issue of parental control. Because some parents who allowed assignment expressed regret about it afterwards, only 44% of Neighborhood High parents were satisfied with the final outcome, compared to 100% of Charter High parents. For Charter High parents, their “ability to opt out of a mediocre neighborhood school” is illustrative of the weak form of empowerment that equates empowerment with choice itself. The 19% of Neighborhood High parents who explicitly opted in and the 44% of them who were satisfied is also evidence of a weak form of empowerment. The 43% of Neighborhood High parents who tried to choose other options but were assigned nonetheless were unable to realize even the weak form of empowerment. These data provide evidence of limited and weak empowerment among parents.

Parents’ search for quality also accords with part of the definition of individual agency that emphasizes directed, purposive action. Parents compared and made evaluations of school quality and prioritized their particular definitions of quality—whether

Table 2. Choice, Assignment, and Satisfaction

	Neighborhood High	Charter High
% who chose	19%	100%
% who allowed assignment	38%	0%
% who were assigned despite contrary efforts	43%	0%
% satisfied with outcome	44%	100%

that meant college prep, special education services, or classrooms that allowed students to concentrate. Parents implemented their will to engage in the school decision-making process. However, another key component of individual agency is that it is voluntary. Some parents' descriptions of the multiple bad options around them undermine the notion that their engagement in school choice was voluntary. Whether described as students "running in the halls" or as the mayhem that occurred when schools dismissed, the search for a quality school was frequently motivated by push factors away from bad options, rather than a voluntary interest in searching out new schools. In other words, many parents felt compelled to make a choice if they wanted to avoid schools they perceived not to be quality options. Fifty percent of Neighborhood High parents and 78% of Charter High parents mentioned avoidance as motivating their school search, and not one parent expressed positive enthusiasm for or a personal desire to search for schools.

In general, it is difficult with these data to quantify the proportion of parents for whom all three features (voluntary, directed, and purposeful) of individual agency pertained. All of Charter High parents and 62% of Neighborhood High parents (the 19% who opted in and the 43% who looked elsewhere) engaged in directed and purposeful action. Their narratives about bad options, however, suggest that only a minority of them did so voluntarily. The 38% of Neighborhood High parents who put forth little effort, gathered little information, and assumed their child would go to Neighborhood High also present an interesting case for gauging agency (Delale-O'Connor 2011). Their immediate actions were not directed or purposeful, and thus did not constitute individual agency; they simply did not impede what would happen automatically. However, even some proportion of this group could be said to exhibit individual agency since prior voluntary action may have set the groundwork for the current school placement. As one mother stated, "Oh, I didn't think there was very much I had to do because I went through it with my other child. So I already knew what I had to do, so I really kinda figured he was gonna go to Neighborhood High anyway." For this mother, experience with an older child familiarized her with the process such that her previous exercise of individual agency determined later outcomes.

Overall, then, there is considerable evidence of directed and purposeful action among parents in both schools, but the voluntary nature of most parents' behavior is questionable. Thus, when exploring what parents want out of schools, I conclude that there is *limited* individual agency. Also, insofar as many parents did make a choice, there is evidence of the weak form of empowerment. In the next sections, I present data on parents' experiences of barriers to access and being chosen to explore questions of agentic power, strong empowerment, and control.

(Barriers to) Access

While some parents attained a weak form of empowerment simply by choosing, Orr (2003) offers a stronger version of empowerment as consisting, in part, of “political access” (p. 256). Yet, the data from these parents overwhelmingly show that access to the public good of a quality school was severely constrained. Transportation loomed large as a barrier. As Table 1 shows, only 23% of Neighborhood High parents and 65% of Charter High parents had access to a car. This means that many families relied on Chicago’s trains and busses, on which CPS students pay a reduced fare, but do not ride free. The cost of public transportation considered prominently in Mr. Lloyd’s decision to send his son to Neighborhood High. Mr. Lloyd’s oldest son had gotten mixed up in the “wrong crowd” at Neighborhood High and therefore he had some trepidation about the fact that his youngest son would soon be going there. Still, he described his thought process as follows:

We were kind of leaning toward Benjamin Mays Academy. Because we just had one [son] graduate from there this year with no problems, good grades, so we were kind of leaning towards something like that. [But] that was kind of hard on us the first couple of years that my son was there because we had to pay for transportation there and back until he got his own job and was able to afford his own car fare.

Unlike Mays Academy, where his middle son had attended and had a positive experience, Neighborhood High was in walking distance from their home and this was attractive because the Lloyds did not own a car. Any school but Neighborhood High would have meant public transportation costs, and Mr. Lloyd was out of work. In this case, even though Mr. Lloyd had identified a better option, he did not have access to it, and so his choice was Neighborhood High.

Even when families had a car, they did not always have the flexibility or the time to coordinate driving children to school. Moreover, the transportation barrier was not only about cost and coordination, but also about safety. Ms. Cromwell, the grandmother of a Charter High student, owned a car and had considered a distant high-performing high school for her grandson. In the end, she decided it was too far since his safety might be at risk on days that she could not drive him. She reasoned that the plus factor of Charter High was that: “If it’s one of those days where grandma have a down day where I can’t get you there, you won’t be hindered. You get on the bus, go on your own accord, don’t have to be fearful. Like I said, at 3:45 you have to be watchful that the neighborhood changes.” Another mother whose son had a learning disability resolved to send him to Neighborhood High after considering other options that she thought were better because it was the only way she could be sure that he would not get lost. “Because I know that he have different issues of learning and knowin’ his way. I know Neighborhood. I could walk him several times and he would know his way backwards and forwards. That [way] he could go to school by himself.”

For myriad reasons—cost, safety, logistics, or peace of mind—schools outside of the neighborhood were a hard sell for both Neighborhood and Charter High parents. The preference for nearby schools—which is strong among parents more generally (Hastings et al., 2005; Schneider and Buckley, 2002)—did not stem from a limited worldview or a reluctance to make sacrifices for their children’s learning, but rather reflected real safety risks, coordination impossibilities, economic hardships, and concerns for their children’s special circumstances (Bell 2007). In each of these cases, parents exercised individual agency by weighing options and making the best decisions they could, under the circumstances. The weight of those circumstances, however,

illustrated that they hardly acted “independently of social structural constraints” (Campbell 2009, p. 416), the marker of agentic power. Instead, those constraints tightly restricted what kinds of actions they could take, and limited their access to what they perceived to be better options.

Other barriers loomed equally large. Parents’ and family members’ poor health, caregiving responsibilities, unpredictable or rigid work schedules, finances, and single parenthood all made it hard to search for high schools and stymied access.¹⁴ For example, Ms. Cromwell, quoted above, was in forced retirement at age fifty-five. Her own health challenges and raising two grandchildren were slowing her down. “I’m not physically able to do what I did last year,” she remarked. “My kids are getting older and they’re putting more demands on me and I put their interests ahead of mine sometimes.” Ms. Cromwell struggled to balance it all, recognized the toll it was taking, but continued to make sacrifices. When it was time to decide on a high school, she thought that she would get pamphlets and flyers and information packets from the elementary school or from CPS. “A great big campaign,” she expected. She waited, but “that didn’t come. They make you take ownership.” Any access to the public good of schools that Ms. Cromwell was going to realize would have to be the result of her own efforts. So onto her plate of rearing grandchildren, keeping afloat financially, and trying to stay healthy, she added searching for a high school for her grandson.

A final salient barrier to access was unrelated to families’ own circumstances and instead had to do with the system of school choice itself. Many CPS options required students to submit their grades and test scores for consideration. In Chicago, the most elite public high schools are called selective-enrollment schools and students must have high test scores, good grades, and perform well on the entrance exam to qualify. There are always more qualified students than slots. Hence, a minority of students has access to the best options. A tier below the selective-enrollment schools are other options—such as International Baccalaureate, magnet, gifted, and specialized programs—that also consider test scores, but may have lower cut-offs. The requirement to submit test scores discouraged many parents from having their children apply broadly to other schools. For example, Neighborhood High foster-mother Ms. Price commented, “Shawnelle’s math score wasn’t high enough to get into Greencastle High School. But I think the better the school the more she could excel.” Similarly, Ms. McFarland of Charter High narrated how her options dwindled as she learned about entrance requirements:

I got fliers and stuff but then he wasn’t up to par in their, you know, acceptance. Some of them you had to have a special grade level to even take the tests and stuff. But that was just literature that I looked at. I didn’t even try to go forth ‘cause some of them seemed like they were so demanding for him. It was hard because I just didn’t want him to be lost in the system. I didn’t want him to be shuffled, you know, with his scores and everything. And I knew he was working so hard and he has such a good spirit, you know. I just wanted him to have a chance.

In addition to recognizing the external barriers to accessing some schools, Ms. McFarland also conveyed a general sense of intimidation by the process, fearing that the competitive testing atmosphere might stifle her grandson’s confidence.

External barriers to access raise the issue of control in school choice politics. To evaluate the evidence on control, I ask the question: Has control of student placement been shifted from school districts to parents? In this example, we see that parents did not control the array of options that CPS presented to them, nor did they control the admissions criteria that various schools set. Parents like Ms. Price above voiced directed preferences and purposeful logic (i.e., individual agency) in statements like

“I think the better the school the more she could excel.” However, Ms. Price’s opinions were not the basis upon which school placement decisions were made. Instead, the district and individual schools set admissions criteria and enrollment guidelines, and Ms. Price’s preferred school required high test scores. Had Ms. Price been in control of her child’s high school placement, she would have been at Greencastle instead of Neighborhood High.

Furthermore, the schools that considered test scores in admissions cast an out-sized shadow on the school choice process in general. Despite the fact that other school types like charters and some career academies did not base admissions on prior performance, many parents thought that they did. Some Neighborhood High parents, for example, didn’t consider any other schools because they assumed that Neighborhood High was the only option because of their children’s test scores. “I think that’s the only school that he could attend right now until he bring up his scores,” said one mother. “I didn’t have no expectation [about deciding on a high school] because I know he had to go [to Neighborhood] because that was his only option because his grade level was too low to go anywhere else,” said another. While this is primarily an information problem, it represents how information deficits can limit access (Hastings et al., 2008; Schneider et al., 1997). Imperfect information is always a reality, and the resource barriers discussed previously explain why disadvantaged parents have the hardest time getting accurate information. They are the least able to act independently of these structural constraints and thus less able to exercise agentic power.

Finally, while most parents presented the testing regime that closed off options for their children as the simple reality, a smaller group of parents were angered by the practice. Mr. Nelson, the grandfather from Neighborhood High who read the newspaper with his grandson, was strident in his critique. I asked Mr. Nelson’s daughter (the student’s mother): “And once you got a sense of what high schools were out there and what options you had, what did you have to do for each of the schools that he was interested in?” The mother responded: “Take tests. Tests. All tests. Every last one want you to take a test.” Energized by this topic, Mr. Nelson broke in:

Well, you know what? I feel [like] why would he have to take a test to get in the school when he already took tests to graduate [from 8th grade]? I mean, look at his test scores. Why do he have to take a test and write a 22-word essay to get into your school? So that means that you weeding out who you want to get in your school. So I figure you think my grandson ain’t good enough for your school...
 ...[The school system] don’t know nothing about him. I felt like [the selective high schools] should have sent something out for every person that signed the sheet [at the CPS High School Fair]. Get to know the parent and the student. That’s something they could do instead of going by what grammar school he came from [and] what area [he came from]. I know they go by test scores but sometimes you could have a smart child and they just can’t test right...
 ...We already have it bad amongst each other, and you start throwing roadblocks at these kids that want to go to Clarion [High School], but their test scores [are] not good enough. Well [there comes a point] when I have to do all this just to get in the school and I don’t feel that it’s worth it.

Mr. Peterson, a father from Charter High, echoed Mr. Nelson’s outrage:

[CPS should] get rid of all of these different tests just to get a student in a school. I mean if I live in the area and this particular school has these levels of academic requirements, why can’t I just send my son there and just make sure that he meets

those needs by getting him the tutoring or getting him whatever it is that he needs in order to excel in that school. I mean this is just like segregation of the '50's if you ask me.

Finally, Ms. Wright of Charter High went so far as to make an inquiry into the matter on behalf of her son:

I will say that Brian did want to go to one of the selective enrollment schools but he did not test high enough to get in any of them. And I will reiterate again that my property taxes are so high [such that] I didn't understand why my child couldn't go to Adams High School. I actually called CPS and asked them why was that, and they told me that the selective enrollment schools didn't have anything to do with the taxes that you pay, which I didn't quite understand.

This final set of quotations illustrates a coherent, albeit nascent, political position. These parents outwardly expressed frustration that neither their children's own personal qualities, nor the taxes they paid, nor the neighborhoods where they lived were sufficient for their children to have access to a high-quality school that they wanted to choose. They explicitly stated that they did not have control over school placement. Ms. Wright even inquired and complained, but the vague response only led her to redouble her efforts to make a good choice—a show of individual agency—rather than to channel the grievance into agentic power through disruptive action or protest.

Nonetheless, these explicit complaints represent sentiments that might show up on surveys of political attitudes towards school choice or that could be mobilized into collective political resistance. They are grievances about an unfair balance of power, about prejudicial institutional decisions, and about an unjust distribution of resources, and they state what should be done about it. In other words, they are easily recognizable as political. Yet they constitute only part of the everyday politics that in-depth interviews uncover. When we listen to parents' stories in all of their complexity (as the whole transcript allows), even those who seem to accept the power of test scores to determine a child's high school offer evidence that they too are discontent.

For example, Ms. Phillips stated: "Picking a high school is basically like a *common sense* thing with me, because, you know, it's based on the kids' grades, you know, their conduct, uh, what else is there?" (emphasis added). This statement came toward the end of a long conversation about how Ms. Phillips decided on Neighborhood High for her niece, Marie, who she was raising. Yet prior to concluding that it was common sense, Ms. Phillips had described how, in fact, Marie had applied to, and had been rejected from, six schools. There were still other high schools that Marie wanted to pursue but Ms. Phillips couldn't make it to the Open Houses to get the applications. Therefore, Marie would be attending Neighborhood High. This spate of rejections added to the series of hard knocks that Marie had already experienced. Ms. Phillips explained:

When she stayed with her mother, she had problems, like moving from one place to another. And then Marie fell behind. Because really Marie supposed to be like in 10th grade. And, you know, that had a lot of discouragement and everything for Marie. [And now] I don't have car fare for Marie because Marie's mother's not around. So, I just try to keep her self-esteem up.

With just a few weeks before the start of school, Ms. Phillips was trying to be positive about the "common sense" ending to Marie's school search. She told Marie that

Neighborhood High was “changing over,” “getting a new principal and everything,” and “might just be a little bit better.” Yet this strategic optimism could not erase the frustration Ms. Phillips conveyed when reflecting on the roadblocks she faced in getting access to a better school. The details about the other applications and the inability to apply to even more due to time and resource constraints exposed that putting Marie in high school was anything but common sense.

In its full context, Ms. Phillips’s “common sense” that the high school decision was an easy one because Marie’s prior performance consigned her to a school that she did not want to attend actually provides the substance of a political critique of the key themes of school choice politics. Ms. Phillips exercised tremendous individual agency—purposefully (although not wholly voluntarily) directing her energies despite tremendous barriers and hurdles—but saw that her efforts were ineffectual, lacking in agentic power, since she did not have “power over” the situation and could not realize an impact on the actions of others. Relatedly, a core component of the strong version of empowerment is having a *determinative say* in decisions being made by officials or agencies, which Ms. Phillips clearly did not enjoy. This common sense is a retrospective realization of highly restricted access to good options because control over where her niece would attend school had not been transferred from the school district to her as a guardian. Coming at the end of a narrative that illustrates limited individual agency, no control and no strong empowerment, this common sense is more one of surrender to the school choice process.

Being Chosen

The work that parents must do to research and make selections among schools is only half the equation of school choice. The case of Chicago’s selective enrollment schools is again instructive in this regard since the label acknowledges that schools select, or choose, their enrollees, not the other way around. While most school options are not so candidly named, they nonetheless retain the power to do the selecting, whether based on academic achievement, proximity to the school, special talent, lottery, sibling preferences, or some other variable that goes into the algorithms of admission, a process that is often opaque to parents even if some strategize to maximize their outcomes (Jennings 2010; Pathak and Sönmez, 2013). Neighborhood and Charter High parents were keenly aware of their lack of strong empowerment and control in the world of school choice. Both sets of parents complained about the lack of response from schools once they had submitted their applications, and Charter High parents were stressed by the uncertainty of the lottery. In other words, they described being chosen (or not) rather than choosing.

Roughly one out of every seven parents reported getting no response from one or more of the schools to which they applied. One mother of a Neighborhood High student described her confusion as follows: “They sent a little application that you fill out and send it back to the school. And [my daughter] sent it in. [Maybe] they didn’t mail [the acceptance/rejection letters] out ‘cause we didn’t get no response from no high school.” A Charter High mother echoed this sentiment: “I’d send the application out and I wouldn’t hear nothing. So, it’s like, you would have to do all this follow up, calling around to five different schools. There was no response to say, ‘Well, we got your admission letter.’ Nothing like that.” Finally, Mr. Nelson attended the CPS High School Fair, which was billed as the one-stop location to gather information and applications. He heard nothing back from the contacts he made there. Mr. Nelson was persistent in his efforts and adamant in his aggravation, relaying:

I signed up mostly for every school [at the High School Fair] that I thought that would be good for him and I didn't receive nothing from none of the schools. I had to call Dalton and I called Prosser to ask a couple of questions about the dress code, the grade levels, the school period. And with Dalton, I even talked to some of the students because I used to ride the bus with them. But I didn't receive no flyers, no nothing from none of the schools. No nothing. None of them.

The repetition of the words “no” “nothing” and “none of them” represents both the grievance and the critique. Each reverberation is an indictment of the system that instructed Mr. Nelson to “Research, Choose, and Register.” He upheld his part of the bargain by exercising individual agency through doing his research and making some choices; but heard nothing from any of the schools.¹⁵ Agentic power connotes both action and results that are in line with that action, but many parents instead found their efforts to be futile. Moreover, the emphasis on control in pro-choice ideology ignores the important reality that excess demand for the best schools means that not everyone will get what they want; even when they do, it was not because they controlled the outcome. Finally, bureaucratic incompetence (under limited budgets and constant reform) can fail to provide the necessary feedback so that parents at least feel like their efforts have been registered, even if they don't get what they want. The test for the strong version of empowerment is if parents had access, were responded to, and/or played a determinative role in placing their children in high school. These stories make it apparent that political institutions are not responsive to parents' action, and that parents' efforts are far from determinative for school placement outcomes.

Obviously, all of the Charter High parents heard back from at least one school. Parents submitted their child's name and contact information to be placed in the lottery drawing for admission, and they were picked. It is not surprising, however, that waiting for the lottery results would cause apprehension, as for one mother who said, “So I just had my fingers crossed that they would pull his name out so that he could be one of those [in the freshman class].” Other parents expressed displeasure with the lottery because there were necessarily losers. “I just hate [that] his friends [are] on the waiting list,” said Ms. Hartford. But this did not lead to a wholesale critique. Instead, she continued: “They told 'em to call back. Keep calling, keep calling, keep calling. That's what we been doing.”

Some parents exhibited more explicit despair about the possibility of not being chosen. “You don't know if you gonna accept it or not,” said Ms. Lassiter of Charter High, without sharing exactly what *not* accepting a negative lottery decision would look like. The uncertainty might have been enough for her to handle alone, but her son was also caught up in the waiting and the worrying, telling his mom: “The [elementary] school say if this one don't accept me, they gonna just put me in the neighborhood school.” Certain that she did not want her son to go to Neighborhood High, but uncertain about if he would get into Charter High, Ms. Lassiter's final assessment was that “the process is, like, overwhelming, because it's very frustrating.”

Finally, four Charter High parents were critical of the exclusivity of selection processes in general. Even if they felt lucky to have been chosen—and lucky was the overwhelming sentiment, not empowered or agentic—they felt badly for the unlucky ones and therefore thought the process was unfair. Ms. Nevis, a Charter High mother, imagined how any selection process disadvantaged children with less-involved parents. She reasoned:

I won, but I just feel for the kid that might not win. Let's say if I was a alcoholic or something like that, and I just really wasn't involved [in my child's education],

you know. [Let's say a child] had to have a parent go to different things with 'em or whatnot. Some kids don't have that grandparent or that auntie that would've stepped in and took my place. You know? So I feel for the kid that, let's say, he filled out the form himself. Let's say he forged his mama's signature himself. But yet when you gotta produce that parent, he like, 'Dang, who am I gonna take with me?'

Ms. Brown, also from Charter High, registered her objections as follows:

I think the system is really messed up. I think that it's a shame that you have such few slots open for good schools for children so that everyone has to compete for these slots. I think that's the bad part about the charter schools and the selective enrollment. If you don't get one of these slots then you're basically just left at a school pretty much to drown.

Ms. Nevis' and Ms. Brown's comments speak to both the barriers to access raised in the previous section, and to the fact that parents' experience is more of being chosen than of choosing. Facing this reality led to some particularly convoluted comments by parents who strained to bend the popular language of choice to fit their experience of not having any. One parent said that Neighborhood High was the "automatic choice" if her child was not accepted anywhere else (and she was not). Ms. Carter said the following about why her foster daughter, Jeniece, would be going to Neighborhood High: "The only school that they chose for her was Neighborhood."

Even though she gathered that someone had chosen Neighborhood High for Jeniece, Ms. Carter was still confused about why or how that had happened. She insisted that she "didn't send out nothing that said that we wanted to go there" but still she received notification that Jeniece would be attending Neighborhood High in the fall. She wondered if perhaps Jeniece's elementary school had made the decision. She said, "I don't know if they chose it at Taylor [Elementary School] or what. But they're not supposed to choose anything, not unless they let me know, right?" Ms. Carter was distraught and wanted some answers from anyone who might help. All she knew was that someone else had made the choice that she was supposedly charged with making, and that Jeniece was ultimately only chosen by Neighborhood High. This is clear evidence against the idea that school choice offers parents control over school placement.

The Burden of Choice

One response to Neighborhood and Charter High parents' experiential politics of school choice might be: We need more high quality options with easier access. This would increase the potential for strong empowerment by improving access to and responsiveness of political institutions. Additional high quality options might also mean that parents would have more control over and a determinative say in the outcomes of school placement, thereby increasing agentic power. While it moves in the right direction, this solution does not recognize the burden that choice itself represents and the fatigue it produces (Schwartz 2005), particularly for disadvantaged populations (Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013). The weak form of empowerment assumes that making a choice is itself an empowering act, but it overlooks the work that choice involves and the particular toll this can have for parents working hard just to stay afloat. Hence even the weak form of empowerment, of simply choosing itself, is counterbalanced by the burden of enacting the practical work of choice.

Even parents who were happy with the outcome seemed to suffer through the process within the context of all of the other things they were juggling (Pattillo et al., 2014). For Ms. Prescott, for example, the whole experience was an emotional roller coaster:

What I didn't like was when they said a lottery, 'cause like I said, I don't win. I never won a lottery. So I'm like, man, I got kind of deterred away from it. And so with the recent loss of my mom she—you may not know this spiritual stuff, but she come to me in a dream. And she told me the day and the time that Charter High would call, and it came true.

Ms. Prescott was delighted with the ultimate outcome, but the lottery came just months after her mother died and it provoked stress and indecision. Making a choice was not empowering, but daunting. One mother concluded that it “was really interesting, but overwhelming at the same time,” after navigating the intricacies of school types, admissions deadlines, and testing requirements, and then “learning that there were the small schools inside of the big schools.” Several Charter High parents talked about months of praying to be chosen followed by joyous thanksgiving for having been chosen, and both sets of prayers wore them out.

Since Neighborhood High parents weren't as sanguine about the outcome of school choice, they dwelled on the energy they expended along the way. Ms. Caldwell talked about the “ripping and running” she did in order to attend high school Open Houses while also juggling all of her other responsibilities, planned and unplanned. She shared the following details:

I was on the bus [going to the Open Houses] and it was really hard because I had to catch two buses and then I had to walk. And then I had to take the same transportation back home. So it was really hard on that bus fare and transportation. And then, see, [my son] still go back and forth to the doctor. I had a lot of doctors' appointments. They cut down some now but I have to take him back and forth to the doctor too because he have problems with his back and they thought he had scoliosis. And then with his feet he had to have prostates [*sic*] made. And he was going to counseling. But then [my daughter] had got pregnant and so I have to start calling back and making appointments for that. And then I have to go to the doctor every two to three months. My heart doctor and my regular doctor. So that's the reason Neighborhood High is better. I don't have to pay out all that bus fare and that ripping and running. It's about three blocks from my house.

Even if there were more good high school options in Chicago that did not require test scores and did not have lotteries, they would still be inaccessible to Ms. Caldwell and her son if they were more than a few blocks from her house. Having more good options would not eliminate the doctors' appointments, travel challenges, and health problems. In light of her situation, Ms. Caldwell would still probably put her son in Neighborhood High. Combining the school-erected barriers with the challenges of transportation, poor health, single parenthood, and more, means that the most accessible option for the parents I interviewed is the one that does not require them to choose at all. If the neighborhood school is the most accessible for many parents, then the focus on choice is superfluous to ensuring that all neighborhood schools are accessible and of high quality.¹⁶

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Uniformly high-quality neighborhood schools is the reality that many better-off White and (to a much lesser extent) Black parents experience. They use their financial resources to buy into high performing school districts and then put their children in the neighborhood schools (Goyette 2008; Holme 2002; Johnson 2006; Lareau 2014; Shapiro 2004). The choice they exercise is enabled by resources that the families I interviewed do not have. Surely some middle-class families bear financial burdens and experience stress in making the right choice of school districts for their children, but Shelley Kimelberg (2014) argues that many such families also have the “privilege of risk” and are “aware that they [have] a safety net of financial, human, and cultural capital that they could activate to switch course if necessary” (p. 210). Charter and Neighborhood High parents, on the other hand, are already neck-high in risk. Therefore, any argument that applauds a little hard work as an acceptable price to pay for a quality school underestimates the cumulative physical and psychological effort that poor parents expend in making ends meet and surviving (Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013); minimizes the disproportionate toll that searching for a school takes on families for whom even bus fare can pose a financial challenge; and legitimizes the logic that accessing a quality public good should *require* work in the first place.

School choice advocates contend that giving parents choices empowers them to influence public school curricula and practices since schools must then compete for students in order to survive. Invoking the most sacred tool of democratic participation, school choice ostensibly allows parents to vote with their feet (Warren 2011). Yet only some of the parents experience empowerment, and then only a weak form of it. Strong empowerment was lacking as parents struggled to comprehend the array of school options, strained to fill out applications and visit schools, and confronted the barriers to access erected by the schools themselves. There was evidence of limited personal agency—with the question of voluntariness the most vexing—but no evidence of agentic power, control, or a determinative say as they waited (sometimes in vain) to hear back from schools to which they applied and dealt with the good or bad news of being chosen or not. Those who got bad news felt utterly defeated: “He really didn’t wanna go to Neighborhood, but he had no choice,” commented one mother. Those who got good news felt either nothing—as in the parents who expected to be assigned to Neighborhood High and went with that—or lucky, as did most Charter High parents. Hence, while school choice may strongly empower more advantaged parents who in some instances have taken control over an entire urban school and realized agentic power by achieving clear results (Cucchiara 2013; Pattillo 2007; Posey 2012), this was not the experience of the poor and working class Black parents I interviewed.

What, then, do these parents communicate through their recollections of deciding on a high school? The experiences and perspectives of poor and working class Black parents in Chicago emphasize unfettered access to quality schools. For many of these parents, access was predicated on a school being close and requiring no effort for enrollment. This invokes concepts that have disappeared from and are even perhaps taboo in school reform debates. Words like provision, state responsibility, and entitlement all require the state to meet people where they are as opposed to requiring citizens to seek out, navigate, and work for public benefits. In the absence of an entitlement to quality schools that allows students to “do what they gotta do,” Black parents will of course enter lotteries and line up to secure better schools for their children. They surely display individual agency in doing so. That, however, is not proof of a pro-school-choice politics, but is instead a political critique of how the state is currently falling short of these parents’ visions of educational opportunity and equity.

NOTES

1. This research was funded by a MacArthur Summer Research Grant and a University Research Grant both from Northwestern University. The author would like to thank Lori Delale-O'Connor, Felicia Butts, and Keenya Hofmaier for their collaboration, and the two schools and parents for their participation. The paper received very helpful comments from Sean Corcoran, Jennifer Hochschild, Desmond King, and the participants in the Straus Fellows Seminar at New York University, as well as from the anonymous reviewers.
2. The issue of school desegregation has long been and continues to be central to Black political approaches to education reform. School choice and desegregation intersect in several ways, including: the history of private school choice as a Southern backlash effort against court-mandated desegregation (Bonastia 2012); the creation of magnet schools to encourage voluntary integration (Rossell 1990); and contemporary arguments that charter schools exacerbate racial segregation in schools (Frankenberg et al., 2010). For a discussion of school choice vis-à-vis the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, see Chapter 5 in Minow (2010).
3. The definition of charter schools from the U.S. Department of Education is as follows: "Charter schools are public schools that operate with freedom from many of the local and state regulations that apply to traditional public schools. Charter schools allow parents, community leaders, educational entrepreneurs, and others the flexibility to innovate and provide students with increased educational options within the public school system" (U.S. Department of Education 2013).
4. While vouchers and charters are the topics of intense public debate and protest, and frequently discussed in the media, their national coverage is modest, especially when compared to much more comprehensive initiatives like high-stakes testing and Common Core curricular standards. As of 2013, charter schools made up only about 5% of all schools in the United States and enrolled only about 3% of students nationwide, although Blacks (and Latinos in some places) were overrepresented in charter schools (Aud et al., 2013). Similarly, only twelve states plus the District of Columbia had school voucher programs as of 2013 (National Conference of State Legislatures 2013). However, the presence of charters and vouchers in big cities where many Blacks and Latinos live makes them more salient in Black political discussions. For example, 79% of students in New Orleans, 51% in Detroit, and 43% in Washington, DC attend charter schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools 2013); and 25% of public school students in Harlem attend charter schools (New York City Charter Center 2012).
5. In previous work (Pattillo 2007) I characterize charter schools as part of neoliberal urban policy initiatives even as I have participated in the founding of a charter school and consider my politics to be, at least, progressive.
6. See Dillon (2004) for other examples of strange bedfellows. For a critique, see King and Smith (2008a) and Scott (2011).
7. A later iteration of community control was "local control," with the most comprehensive example being the decentralization of Chicago Public Schools in the 1980s and the creation of Local School Councils, which took control of budgeting, personnel, and curricular decisions (Fung 2004).
8. For a critique of this slippage, see Scott (2013b).
9. Twenty-five percent of the respondents were not the mother or father of the student who would be entering high school. These guardians included grandparents, foster parents, aunts, and older siblings. I use "parent" and "child" throughout this article when referring in the abstract to all of the interviewees, but specify the relationship of the interviewee to the student in the presentation of examples.
10. Coding is the most important part of the process for yielding findings in qualitative research. It is in coding that all of the interview data is considered so that the researcher does not make impressionistic conclusions or overlook contradictory evidence. I used

the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. Of the fifty-four codes used in analyzing these data, the following were particularly relevant for this paper: Choice as Ambivalence, Choice as Avoidance, Choice as Pull; Curricula; Disappointment; Lottery; No Response; Parent Constraints; Philosophies; Selection Process (of schools, not of parents); Test Scores and Grades; and Transportation. Also, Atlas.ti can generate a spreadsheet that reports frequencies for each code, which can be taken as a measure of strength or salience of a certain theme or topic.

11. While the research was designed to have an equal number of randomly selected parents from each school, this proved impossible. The entering freshman class of Neighborhood High was twice as large as that of Charter High, but it took much more effort to get fewer interviews of Neighborhood High parents. First, we sent letters to parents. At least 75% of the letters to Neighborhood High parents were returned because of bad addresses. A minority of Charter High letters came back. Then we made phone calls and the pattern was repeated: disconnected and wrong phone numbers for Neighborhood High parents versus greater availability, including by email, of Charter High parents. These challenges led to fewer interviews of Neighborhood High than Charter High parents. In the end, I interviewed all parents who responded to the recruitment and agreed to be interviewed, so the sample is not representative of parents in these schools. I expect that both samples were relatively *more* advantaged than the universe of parents at the respective schools (thus understating my findings) given their relatively greater residential stability and working telephone numbers. The fact that we paid interviewees \$20 for their time may have selected for those with the greatest financial need, but they needed to first be accessible to even learn of this financial incentive. All parent, student, and school names in the paper are pseudonyms.
12. There are thirty-one unique parents quoted in the Findings section—fifteen Neighborhood High parents and sixteen Charter High parents. It would be impossible to quote every parent interviewed, so these data capture statements made by several other parents, as indicated through the coding and analysis process.
13. Neighborhood High parents were less likely than Charter High parents to mention a college preparatory curriculum as part of their measure of quality (20% vs. 50%). Neighborhood High parents were more likely to emphasize a trade or other skills-training curriculum that would prepare their child for a job after high school.
14. For similar findings, see Cooper (2005) and Quane and Wilson (2011).
15. This is not just a case of Chicago Public Schools being particularly disorganized or running its choice system poorly. In her dissertation on choice in New York City, Sarah Jessen (2011) likens the process to a labyrinth. She documents a range of “miscommunications and imprecise descriptions” whose significance for parents’ ability to make choices “cannot be understated” (p. 135).
16. This perspective is in line with Justine Hastings and Jeffrey Weinstein (2008) who report: “[W]e find that a key predictor of both responding to information by choosing an alternative school and the test score of the school chosen is proximity to high-scoring school alternatives. This is consistent with a model in which parents choose schools to maximize utility, which is increasing in expected academic achievement but decreasing in time and travel costs, and implies that, even with transparent information, school choice can only be as effective as the options offered to parents” (p. 1376). If all options are good, then even socioeconomic challenges won’t prevent children from landing in a good school. This is another way to talk about ensuring the high quality of the default options (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008).

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