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# MORE THAN SCORES

An Analysis of Why and How  
Parents Choose Private Schools

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JAMES P. **KELLY**, III, J.D. and  
BENJAMIN **SCAFIDI**, Ph.D.

November 2013

**THE FRIEDMAN FOUNDATION**  
FOR EDUCATIONAL CHOICE  
**edchoice.org** 

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## Executive Summary

This report uses the results of a survey administered to Georgia parents of K–12 private school scholarship recipients to address three questions:

- In choosing the private school education best suited for the overall needs of their children, do parents primarily focus on the results from standardized tests administered to students attending the school or do they rely on a variety of factors, including student safety, class size, classroom discipline, religious education, high school completion and post-secondary success, and a greater sense of community?
- To enable parents to make informed choices regarding the education of their children, what information should private schools provide to them and to the community at large?
- If state and local governments empowered parents to educate their children in the public or private schools of their choice, and parents were able to secure relevant information relating to those choices, would a more efficient “spontaneous education order” arise?

We address those questions in light of the following:

- Frustrated by the failure of many local public school districts to educate their students adequately, parents, politicians, and policymakers are considering alternative systems for the delivery of K–12 education in America.
- American youth, their parents, and educators are facing a wide range of social and cultural challenges that add great complexity and uncertainty to the K–12 education mission.
- The implementation of K–12 school choice programs (e.g., tax-credit scholarships and vouchers) in many states is producing a large number of parents who, for a variety of reasons, have transferred their children from public to private schools.

In 2013, Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program, Inc. (GOAL), a tax-exempt, nonprofit student scholarship organization operating under Georgia’s Education Expense Credit (i.e., tax-credit scholarship) law, asked the parents of scholarship recipients to complete a survey pertaining to the reasons they chose a private school for their children and the information about private schools that they deem important to the school selection process.

The results of the surveys completed by 754 GOAL parents indicate they have a variety of reasons for transferring their children from public schools to private schools and that they rely on a wide variety of information in evaluating prospective private schools.

Key findings from the survey include:

- Surveyed parents were overwhelmingly satisfied with their private school choice, with 98.6 percent of parents being “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with their decision to send their children to a private school using a GOAL scholarship.
- The top five reasons why parents chose a private school for their children are all related to school climate and classroom management, including “better student discipline” (50.9 percent), “better learning environment” (50.8 percent), “smaller class sizes” (48.9 percent), “improved student safety” (46.8 percent), and “more individual attention for my child” (39.3 percent).
- Student performance on standardized test scores is one of the least important pieces of information upon which parents base their decision regarding the private school to which they send their children. Only 10.2 percent of the parents who completed the survey listed higher standardized test scores as one of their top five reasons why they chose a particular private school for their child.
- Parents desire a wide variety of information to help them decide where to send their children to school, including, but not limited to, the student-teacher ratio (84.2 percent), school accreditation (70.2 percent), curriculum and course descriptions (69.9

percent), college acceptance rate (61.3 percent), and the availability of religious instruction (56 percent). In contrast, only 21.5 percent of the parents listed “the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic makeup of the student population” as being important to their school selection process.

- Parents desire to be informed education consumers, with about 93 percent of parents indicating they would be willing to take three or more time-consuming steps to obtain the desired information.
- Contrary to the assertions of some school choice opponents, low-income parents, single parents, African-American parents, and parents with less than a college education are willing and able to be informed and active education consumers on behalf of their children.
- Because they risk losing students to other K–12 schools in the educational marketplace, private schools have an incentive to voluntarily provide the information desired by parents. Based on the survey results, the failure of a private school to provide information would (79 percent) or might (20 percent) negatively impact a parent’s decision on whether to send his or her children there.

By providing parents with private (e.g., tax-credit scholarship) or public (e.g., voucher) funds for the education of their children at the private schools of their choice, it is possible to create a spontaneous education order.

In a spontaneous education order, empowered parents would seek information about private or public schools in their communities. In turn, to remain competitive, private or public schools would need to publish or otherwise make available the information sought by parents. And, rather than implementing onerous “rules of organization” that are used to perpetuate and micro-manage a government-run K–12 education monopoly, public officials would institute minimum “rules of just conduct,” which would protect the spontaneous education order from anti-democratic practices or tangible threats to child safety.

The adoption by many states of tax-credit scholarship or voucher programs is the first step toward building a pro-parent and pro-family spontaneous education order. To build on that important development:

- State and local officials and private schools should consider the reasons why parents are choosing to transfer their children from public schools to private schools.
- Parents should inform private schools about the information they deem important in making their decisions regarding the schools to which they send their children.
- Nonprofit education foundations, policymakers, parents, school choice advocates, researchers, and associations of private independent schools should (1) communicate on how to build online platforms for the publication and sharing of information about private schools that parents deem important to the school selection process and (2) reach consensus on those minimum rules of just conduct that are necessary to prevent private schools from engaging in anti-democratic practices and to prevent private schools from creating environments that lead to tangible threats to child safety.
- Given the low priority parents place on standardized test scores in choosing the private schools best suited for their children, public officials should resist the temptation to impose national or state standards and testing on private schools or demand that private schools publish “report cards” emphasizing test score performance.

## Introduction



*African-American families are the ones who (were) most prone to enroll their kids in the fly-by-night schools that cropped up after vouchers existed.... [African-American families] don't know how to make good choices for their children. They really don't. They didn't have parents who made good choices for them or helped them learn how to make good choices, so they don't know how to do that.*

— Racine Unified School District  
Superintendent **Ann Laing**, Wisconsin<sup>1</sup>



Those remarks, made by Superintendent Laing at a December 2011 informational forum to discuss the expansion of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, represent the view of many school choice opponents that parents are incapable of making “good” choices for the education of their children outside the public schools to which they are assigned by ZIP Code. Yet, rather than seeking to understand the reasons why parents select a particular school for their children or to help them become informed education consumers, many public officials either deny parents the opportunity to take advantage of alternative educational options or impose on private schools the same standardized curriculum, testing, and assessment methods used in public schools.

As states provide parents with greater opportunities for access to learning through tax-credit scholarships and vouchers, it is critical to evaluate the reasons parents choose particular schools for their children, the information upon which they rely in doing so, and the policies and practices that are required to create a “spontaneous education order” that empowers them.

This report uses the results of a survey administered to Georgia parents of K–12 private school scholarship recipients to address three questions:

- In choosing the private school education best suited for the overall needs of their children, do parents focus primarily on the results from standardized tests administered to students attending the school or do they rely on a variety of factors, including student safety, class size, classroom discipline, religious education, high school completion and post-secondary success, and a greater sense of community?
- To enable parents to make informed choices regarding the education of their children, what information should private schools provide to them and to the community at large?
- If state and local governments empowered parents to educate their children in the public or private schools of their choice, and parents were able to secure relevant information relating to those choices, would a more efficient spontaneous educational order arise?

The purpose of this study is to address those questions based on the results of a 2013 survey completed by 754 parents whose children received scholarships to attend the private schools of their choice under the Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program (GOAL). GOAL operates the largest Student Scholarship Organization (SSO) in Georgia. Georgia law permits taxpayers to receive a state income tax credit for private contributions made to qualified SSOs.<sup>2</sup> The SSOs use the contributed funds to award scholarships to families for the education of their children at accredited private schools.

Prior to examining the survey results, this report will briefly examine current alternatives to traditional public schools, the social and cultural challenges families and K–12 education in America are facing, and the nature of the Georgia Education Expense Credit (i.e., tax-credit scholarship) and related Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program.



After examining the survey results, this report will outline the nature of a spontaneous education order that could arise from the free actions of informed K–12 education consumers and private K–12 schools free of unnecessary government regulations. We conclude with several policy and practical recommendations that would promote such an order.

## Public Education and School Choice

Measured in constant 2011–12 dollars, real spending per student in American public schools—adjusted for inflation—has increased from \$764 per student in the 1919–20 school year to \$13,692 in the 2009–10 school year. That represents an increase in real spending per student of 1,692 percent.<sup>3</sup> Yet, in all areas of America—rural, urban, and suburban—parents have become increasingly concerned that they cannot secure a quality education for their children at the public schools to which their children are assigned. Of greatest concern has been the ongoing failure of many urban public school districts to successfully educate a large percentage of their students.<sup>4</sup>

Tired of being told by politicians and others to “be patient” and support efforts to improve the local public schools, many parents are demanding greater access to other learning opportunities. To meet that demand, state legislators have enacted a variety of alternatives to traditional public schools, including:

- public charter schools,
- online public “cyber” academies,
- career academies,
- tax-credit scholarship programs that grant taxpayers state income tax credits for their private contributions to nonprofits that award scholarships to children to transfer from public schools to the private schools of their parents’ choice,
- voucher programs in which the state provides public

funds to parents that they can use to pay all or a part of the tuition at the private school they choose for their children to attend, and

- more flexible homeschooling options, including hybrid schooling where students receive instruction from more than one delivery mode (e.g., homeschool, face-to-face, and/or online instruction).<sup>5</sup>

As those so-called “school choice,” “educational choice,” or “parental choice” options have proliferated, so has opposition from those with a vested interest in protecting the status quo in public education, including the leaders of teachers’ unions, public school board associations, and public school superintendent associations. Those opponents of providing parents with more education options either fight against the adoption of those alternatives or, if school choice programs are enacted, work to weigh them down with many of the cumbersome rules and regulations that apply to traditional public schools.<sup>6</sup>

Although early opposition to school choice included business, civic, and foundation leaders, many of those individuals have started to embrace the idea that, rather than perpetuating the government-operated public school monopoly, the government should empower parents to choose from a variety of options to educate their children.<sup>7</sup>

Some supporters of school choice programs believe that, as a condition of being eligible to participate in voucher or tax-credit scholarship programs, private schools should be required to administer the same standardized tests offered to public school students. To the contrary, other supporters of school choice believe the focus should be on empowering parents to choose schools based on what is in the best interests of their children. In the latter case, it is important to identify the variety of reasons parents choose to enroll their children in private schools, to identify the types of information upon which parents rely in choosing the best school for their children, and to encourage private schools to provide the information that will enable interested parents to become informed consumers relating to the K–12 education of their children.

## Social and Cultural Challenges Facing Parents and K–12 Education in America

Any meaningful discussion of parents' preferences in choosing the most appropriate education for their children can take place only in the context of the difficult social and cultural conditions facing elementary and secondary school families in modern America. Some of the relevant statistics include the following:

- In 2011, 40.8 percent of all births were to unmarried mothers. Among Hispanics, that figure was 53 percent and, among blacks, it was 72 percent.<sup>8</sup>
- As of 2011, 25.8 percent of children in America were being raised by a single parent.<sup>9</sup>
- In 2012, 6.5 percent of eighth graders, 17 percent of 10th graders, and 22 percent of 12th graders used marijuana in the past month.<sup>10</sup>
- As of 2012, 11 percent of all American children ages four to 17 (more than six million in all) have been diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), an increase of 16 percent since 2007.<sup>11</sup>
- In 2012, 14.8 percent of high school seniors used a prescription drug non-medically in the past year. Data for specific drugs show the most commonly abused prescription drugs by teens are the stimulant Adderall and the pain reliever Vicodin.<sup>12</sup>
- In 2010, only 52 percent of black male ninth graders graduated from high school in four years, compared with 58 percent of Latino male ninth graders and 78 percent of white, non-Latino male ninth graders.<sup>13</sup>
- On any given day in 2007, nearly 23 percent of all young black men ages 16–24 who had dropped out of high school were in jail, prison, or a juvenile justice institution in America.<sup>14</sup>
- Black high school dropouts in 2007 experienced the highest jobless rate at 69 percent followed by Asians at 57 percent and whites at 54 percent.<sup>15</sup>
- In a 2011 nationally representative sample of youth in grades nine through 12, 12 percent reported being in a physical fight on school property in the 12 months before the survey; 5.9 percent reported they did not go to school on one or more days in the 30 days before the survey because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to or from school; 5.4 percent reported carrying a weapon on school property one or more days in the 30 days before the survey; and 20 percent reported being bullied on school property and 16 percent reported being bullied electronically during the 12 months before the survey.<sup>16</sup>
- In 2011, students ages 12–18 were victims of about 1,246,000 nonfatal victimizations at school, including 648,600 thefts and 597,000 violent victimizations (simple assault and serious violence).<sup>17</sup>
- During the 2009–10 school year, 16 percent of public schools reported that gang activities had occurred and about 20 percent of students ages 12–18 reported that gangs were present at their schools.<sup>18</sup>
- As classroom discipline problems undermine teacher control and effectiveness and the learning environment for students, instead of helping state and local school districts address the problem, the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice have launched a campaign against public school districts that, in their view, engage in the disproportionate discipline of minority students, especially black and Hispanic students.<sup>19</sup>
- Among U.S. high school students surveyed in 2011, 47.4 percent had engaged in sexual intercourse; 33.7 percent had engaged in sexual intercourse during the previous three months; 15.3 percent had sex with four or more people during their life; an estimated 8,300 young people

ages 13–24 years in the 40 states reporting to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had an HIV infection in 2009; nearly half of the 19 million new STDs each year are among young people ages 15–24 years; and more than 400,000 teen girls ages 15–19 gave birth in 2009.<sup>20</sup>

- About 11 percent of adolescents have a depressive disorder by the age of 18, and major depressive disorder is the leading cause of disability among Americans ages 15–44.<sup>21</sup>
- Efforts to stop school staff cheating on standardized tests in public school districts throughout America “have been constrained by factors including bureaucratic inertia, budget constraints, and, sometimes, staff and community resistance.”<sup>22</sup>

Remarkably, considering the gravity and impact of those alarming statistics and facts, few public discussions or debates about them occur at the national, state, or local level. Perhaps because of political correctness, the complexity of the problems, the potential of enormous costs associated with remedying the problems, or the knowledge that, even with increased funding and programs, public school districts are often ill-equipped to navigate toward viable solutions, politicians are leaving it to parents to do their best to protect their children from becoming statistics. Unfortunately, the limited financial resources of most families preclude them from looking for solutions outside of the public schools to which their children are assigned.

Though all parents face the decision about where to secure the best education for their children, the decision pertaining to the education of a particular child is an original one. It takes place in the context of unique biological, familial, cultural, economic, and social conditions faced only by the parents and their child. The distinctive ability of parents lies in their capacity to embark successfully on lines of enquiry, which other parents, faced with the same opportunities, would not have recognized or not have thought worthwhile. This is their originality.<sup>23</sup>

Originality entails a distinctively personal initiative and is invariably impassioned, sometimes to the point of obsessiveness. From the parents’ first awareness of the need to select a school for their child, and throughout their consideration of this need to the point of its solution, the process of discovery is guided by a personal vision, and sustained by a personal conviction, of what is in the best interests of their child. To exercise their personal responsibility to decide what is in the best interests of their child in the context of the various conditions to which they and their child may be subject is the acceptance of their calling as parents. Accepting their responsibility to pursue the universal aspiration to do what is in the best interests of their child places parents in a transcendent perspective and assures them of their personhood.<sup>24</sup> By limiting the ability of parents to choose freely from among a variety of educational options, or by placing greater emphasis on one or more educational input (e.g., national curriculum standards) or outcome (e.g., standardized test scores) than on others, the government interferes with the calling of parents and affronts their personal freedom and dignity.

Depending on the academic, social, and cultural needs of their children, parents have a variety of reasons for preferring one education model or school to others, with student character formation playing an important role in the decision-making process. By focusing exclusively on a government-financed and government-managed top-down education model, school choice opponents undermine personal and educational freedom and prevent the creation of a spontaneous education order in which informed parents are empowered to choose from a variety of educational options.

As a result, it is critical to understand the variety of reasons why parents choose private schools and the information they need to make informed decisions. This understanding can be achieved by analyzing the results of the 2013 GOAL Parent Survey, a survey of parents of students who receive GOAL scholarships to attend private schools.

## The Georgia Education Expense Credit and Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program

In 2008, the Georgia General Assembly passed, and Gov. Sonny Perdue signed into law, the Georgia Education Expense Credit Program.<sup>25</sup> The key features of the program include:

- In exchange for contributing to a qualified Student Scholarship Organization (SSO), Georgia taxpayers can receive an offsetting state income tax credit.
- An individual can receive a tax credit for a contribution of up to \$1,000; a married couple can receive a tax credit for a contribution of up to \$2,500; an owner of an interest in a pass-through entity (e.g., S corporation, partnership, or limited liability company) can receive a tax credit for a contribution of up to \$10,000; and a C corporation can receive a tax credit for a contribution of up to 75 percent of its Georgia income tax liability.
- In 2013, the total education expense tax credits annually available to Georgia taxpayers making contributions to SSOs was increased to \$58 million.
- The SSOs, which must be nonprofit entities recognized by the Georgia Department of Education, must use the contributions to provide scholarships to students (grades two and above) whose parents want to transfer them from public schools to accredited private schools and scholarships to students who are eligible to enroll in pre-kindergarten through first grade (regardless of whether they are enrolled in a public or private school).
- When making their contributions, Georgia taxpayers may designate the private schools at which they want the SSO to use their contributions for awarding scholarships; however, contributors may not designate that the SSO award a scholarship to a specific student.

- In most cases, SSOs award scholarships based on the recommendations of the private schools to which the scholarship applicant has applied for acceptance.
- Georgia law requires that SSOs consider the financial needs of scholarship applicant families.
- Although some of the leading SSOs have adopted voluntary guidelines limiting the household income of the scholarship recipients and the amount of scholarship assistance to which they are entitled, the law places no limits on the household income of scholarship recipients and limits the maximum annual scholarship award to the average state and local expenditures per student in fall enrollment in public elementary and secondary education for the state of Georgia. For 2013, this maximum annual scholarship amount is \$9,046.
- Although participating private schools must be accredited by an accrediting agency recognized by the state of Georgia and most of them administer norm-referenced standardized tests to their students, the law does not require them to administer either norm-referenced standardized tests or criterion-referenced end-of-course tests or graduation examinations.

Created in 2008, Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program, Inc. (GOAL) is the largest of the 36 SSOs operating in Georgia, having received approximately 32 percent of all contributions made by taxpayers to SSOs since the adoption of the law in 2008 through 2012.

Key facts pertaining to GOAL include:

- From 2008 through 2012, GOAL received \$54,254,528 in contributions and awarded 8,681 scholarships to 5,220 students, totaling \$33,161,165. As of December 31, 2012, GOAL had obligated an additional \$17.8 million, earmarked for future scholarship payments and awards. In 2012, GOAL awarded 3,366 scholarships.
- GOAL has adopted scholarship award guidelines, voluntarily adhered to by its participating private

schools, which limit the amount of scholarship awards based on the household income of scholarship applicant families and family size.

- As of December 31, 2012, the average federal adjusted gross income of GOAL scholarship recipients was \$51,923 (\$25,705 adjusted for family size) and the average annual amount of the scholarship awarded to each recipient was \$3,815.
- The racial breakdown of GOAL scholarship recipients has been 60 percent Caucasian, 25 percent African-American, 5 percent Hispanic/Latino, 3 percent unknown, and 7 percent other.
- Presently, 122 private schools from throughout Georgia participate in the GOAL program.
- An 11-person board of directors governs GOAL, the members of which include representatives from the juvenile justice, business, philanthropic, education, and religious communities.

## 2013 GOAL Parent Survey

In the spring of 2013, at the request of the authors of this study, GOAL distributed a web-based survey to the parents and caregivers of its scholarship recipients. Hereafter, survey respondents will be termed “parents” for expositional purposes. Parents of GOAL scholarship recipients were asked to fill out the survey, but they were not required to do so. Appendix 1, available at [edchoice.org/MoreThanScores](http://edchoice.org/MoreThanScores), contains a copy of the survey instrument. Parents took the web survey via Survey Monkey, a well-respected online platform for conducting survey research.

Of the 2,685 families who had at least one child receiving a GOAL scholarship and were requested to complete the survey, 962 parents or caregivers responded to the survey—a response rate of 36 percent. Of the 962 parents who took the survey, 754 parents—or 78.4 percent—provided complete data for all questions used in this report. The most common missing variable was a question asking about household income.<sup>26</sup>

Table 1 shows summary statistics of the demographic characteristics of the survey respondents. Some totals do not equal 100 percent because of rounding. The results show that parents from all geographic areas want to secure the best possible education for their child. Among the parents surveyed, 61 percent live in a suburban area, 29 percent in a rural area, and 10 percent in an urban area. Median family income is in the \$48,000–\$60,000 range; just more than two-thirds of respondents had

**TABLE 1** Demographic Characteristics

| Income             | Percent |
|--------------------|---------|
| \$0–\$12,000       | 1.9%    |
| \$12,001–\$24,000  | 9.0%    |
| \$24,001–\$36,000  | 13.7%   |
| \$36,001–\$48,000  | 14.7%   |
| \$48,001–\$60,000  | 18.0%   |
| \$60,001–\$72,000  | 11.7%   |
| \$72,001–\$84,000  | 9.7%    |
| \$84,001–\$96,000  | 7.2%    |
| More than \$96,000 | 14.2%   |

| Educational Attainment     | Percent |
|----------------------------|---------|
| Less than a college degree | 31.6%   |
| College degree or higher   | 68.4%   |

| Marital Status | Percent |
|----------------|---------|
| Not married    | 26.9%   |
| Married        | 73.1%   |

| Race/Ethnicity       | Percent |
|----------------------|---------|
| White or Asian       | 72.8%   |
| Other race/ethnicity | 27.2%   |

| Urbanicity | Percent |
|------------|---------|
| Rural      | 29.1%   |
| Suburban   | 61.0%   |
| Urban      | 10.0%   |

obtained at least a college degree; about 73 percent live in married households; and more than 27 percent consider themselves neither white nor Asian.<sup>27</sup>

To gauge the accuracy of the opinion held by some school choice opponents that many African-American, Hispanic, and Native-American parents are incapable of making good schooling choices for their children, respondent parents were divided into (a) white and Asian and (b) other racial and ethnic categories.

As discussed in the pages to follow, the survey results provide evidence that GOAL scholarship parents are capable of making good educational decisions for their children.

The parents who responded to the survey have higher incomes than the typical families of GOAL scholarship recipients. For that reason, we analyzed the data separately for different demographic groups and report important differences in responses.

We do not claim that the survey respondents are a representative sample of low- and middle-income parents in Georgia. Nevertheless, our results do suggest the low- and middle-income parents who are taking advantage of the GOAL scholarship program are active consumers of K-12 education.

## GOAL Scholarship Parents are Satisfied with Their Private School Choices

Prior to considering the reasons why the surveyed parents chose private schools for their children and the types of information upon which they would rely in doing so again, it is important to note that the surveyed parents were overwhelmingly satisfied with their private school choices.

The survey asked parents about their level of satisfaction with their child's current private school relative to their satisfaction with their child's former public school:

*"Relative to your child's prior public school experience (if any), how satisfied are you overall with your child's current private school experience?"*

Parents were able to select that they were "very satisfied," "satisfied," "dissatisfied," or "very dissatisfied." Relative to their child's former public school, 84 percent of parents indicated that they were "very satisfied" with the private school they were able to choose for their child under the GOAL scholarship program. An additional 14.6 percent were "satisfied" with their new private school. Only 1 percent indicated they were "dissatisfied," while only 0.4 percent indicated they were "very dissatisfied." Thus, 98.6 percent of parents were either "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with their decision to send their children to a private school using a GOAL scholarship.

It is interesting to note that the parents of most GOAL scholarship recipients are making a significant financial investment in sending their children to private schools. In many instances, the GOAL scholarships are substantially less in amount than the tuition charged by the private schools attended by their children. In almost all cases, any financial aid offered by the private schools does not make up that difference. On the one hand, that may make parents more likely to view their investment favorably. More likely, it makes parents more critically evaluate the performance of their children's private schools.

As of December 31, 2012, the average GOAL scholarship was \$3,815. In comparison, for the 2009–10 academic year (the most recent year for which spending information is available), the average spending per student in Georgia public schools was \$10,684.<sup>28</sup> In 2011–12, on average, GOAL scholarships provided 47 percent of the tuition charged by the private schools participating in the GOAL scholarship program. In addition to incurring significant tuition costs, GOAL scholarship families also pay property taxes (directly or indirectly through rent) to support public schools. Yet, they are willing to assume this financial commitment for their children even though almost 70 percent of those families have annual household incomes of \$72,000 or less and more than

39 percent had incomes of \$48,000 or less.<sup>29</sup>

The percentages of parents across demographic groups who are either “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with their children’s new private schools relative to their experiences in their former public schools are virtually identical. However, lower socioeconomic parents are slightly more likely to state they are “satisfied” rather than “very satisfied.” There are no discernible differences across urban, suburban, and rural parents regarding satisfaction.

## Why Did GOAL Scholarship Parents Choose to Enroll Their Children in Private Schools?

The first research question we analyze using the survey is:

In choosing the private school education best suited for the overall needs of their children, do parents focus on the results from standardized tests administered to students attending the school or do they rely on a variety of factors, including student safety, class size, classroom discipline, religious education, high school completion and post-secondary success, and a greater sense of community?

To address that research question, the survey explicitly asked GOAL scholarship parents:

*“There are many possible reasons why families send their children to a private school, rather than to a public school. Please select each of the following reasons you had for sending your child to a private school (you may mark as many or as few reasons as applied to your situation).”*

The survey contained a list of 21 possible reasons why parents chose a private school for their children (see Table 2). Parents were allowed to choose more than one reason, and they were also allowed to choose “other.” The reasons for choosing a private school in Table 2 are sorted from the most stated reason to the least.

**TABLE 2** Reason for choosing a private school for their child

|  | Percent |
|--|---------|
| Better learning environment  | 85.1%   |
| Better education   | 81.3%   |
| Smaller class sizes  | 80.5%   |
| More individual attention for my child   | 76.4%   |
| Religious education  | 64.1%   |
| Better preparation for college   | 62.9%   |
| Better student discipline  | 61.7%   |
| More responsive teachers and administrators                                    | 60.3%   |
| Improved student safety  | 52.9%   |
| Better teachers  | 46.8%   |
| Greater sense of community   | 46.6%   |
| More attention to the unique needs of my child                                 | 44.2%   |
| Other students would be a better influence on my child                         | 41.9%   |
| Greater respect for my rights as a parent                                      | 34.9%   |
| Higher standardized test scores  | 34.6%   |
| Less gang activity   | 33.8%   |
| Less time wasted during the school day   | 32.6%   |
| Other parents would be more concerned about their children’s education         | 31.3%   |
| More meaningful opportunities for parental involvement                         | 30.9%   |
| More extracurricular opportunities   | 21.2%   |
| More tutorial and other supplemental learning services than at a public school | 16.2%   |
| Other  | 7.2%    |

More than 85 percent of parents said they chose a private school for a “better learning environment” for their child, whereas 81.3 percent said the choice was made for a “better education.” The next two most common responses were “smaller class sizes” (80.5 percent) and “more individual attention for my child” (76.4 percent). Other reasons cited by a majority of parents were “religious education” (64.1 percent), “better preparation for college” (62.9 percent), “better student discipline” (61.7 percent), “more responsive teachers and administrators” (60.3 percent), and “improved student safety” (52.9 percent).

“My daughter is getting a quality education. She is raising her standards to those of other college preparatory students. She is in an environment conducive to higher learning with the support system in place to help her.

—GOAL Survey Parent

Parents gave a wide variety of reasons as to why they chose a private school for their child. Among the 21 reasons listed in the survey, 20 of them were cited by at least 20 percent of the survey respondents as a reason for choosing a private school.

**TABLE 3** Most important reason for choosing a private school for my child

|  | Percent |
|--|---------|
| Better education   | 28.2%   |
| Religious education  | 28.1%   |
| Better learning environment  | 10.9%   |
| Improved student safety  | 7.0%    |
| Smaller class sizes  | 4.4%    |
| Better preparation for college   | 4.2%    |
| More attention to the unique needs of my child                                 | 4.1%    |
| More individual attention for my child   | 3.3%    |
| Other  | 3.1%    |
| Better student discipline  | 2.1%    |
| Greater sense of community   | 1.1%    |
| Better teachers  | 0.8%    |
| Other students would be a better influence on my child                         | 0.7%    |
| More responsive teachers and administrators                                    | 0.5%    |
| Other parents would be more concerned about their children's education         | 0.4%    |
| More tutorial and other supplemental learning services than at a public school | 0.4%    |
| Greater respect for my rights as a parent                                      | 0.4%    |
| Less time wasted during the school day   | 0.1%    |
| Less gang activity   | 0.1%    |
| More extracurricular opportunities   | 0.0%    |
| Higher standardized test scores  | 0.0%    |
| More meaningful opportunities for parental involvement                         | 0.0%    |

Contrary to the concern about standardized test scores expressed by those seeking to impose standardized testing requirements on private school students, the choice “higher standardized test scores” was only the 15th-highest rated reason why parents chose a private school for their children. For comparison, 62.9 percent of parents listed “better preparation for college” as a reason for choosing a private school; however, only 34.6 percent listed “higher standardized test scores.”<sup>30</sup> The surveyed parents were also provided an opportunity to prioritize the reasons they chose a private school. Specifically, they had the opportunity to list the “most important reason,” the “second most important reason,” and the third, fourth, and fifth most important reasons why they chose a private school for their children.

**TABLE 4** Second most important reason for choosing a private school for my child

|  | Percent |
|--|---------|
| Better education   | 16.2%   |
| Better learning environment  | 13.0%   |
| Smaller class sizes  | 12.3%   |
| Religious education  | 11.9%   |
| More individual attention for my child   | 8.6%    |
| Better preparation for college   | 7.8%    |
| Better student discipline  | 5.6%    |
| Improved student safety  | 4.6%    |
| Better teachers  | 4.4%    |
| More attention to the unique needs of my child                                 | 4.0%    |
| More responsive teachers and administrators                                    | 2.4%    |
| Greater sense of community   | 1.6%    |
| Other students would be a better influence on my child                         | 1.5%    |
| Greater respect for my rights as a parent                                      | 1.1%    |
| Higher standardized test scores  | 0.9%    |
| Less gang activity   | 0.7%    |
| Other  | 0.7%    |
| More extracurricular opportunities   | 0.5%    |
| More tutorial and other supplemental learning services than at a public school | 0.5%    |
| Less time wasted during the school day   | 0.5%    |
| Other parents would be more concerned about their children's education         | 0.4%    |
| More meaningful opportunities for parental involvement                         | 0.1%    |



Parents were provided the same possible reasons as listed in Table 2. The results are contained in Table 3, which lists the “most important” reason why parents selected a private school. The responses in Table 3 are sorted from the most common to the least common response.

Just two reasons accounted for about 56 percent of the responses: “better education” (28.2 percent) and “religious education” (28.1 percent). The next “most important reasons” were “better learning environment” (10.9 percent), “improved student safety” (7 percent), “smaller class sizes” (4.4 percent), “better preparation for college” (4.2 percent), and “more attention to the unique needs of my child” (4.1 percent).

No respondents listed “higher standardized test scores” as the “most important reason” for choosing a private school.

When it came to listing the “second most” and “third most” important reasons for choosing a private school, the variety of reasons offered by parents significantly increased. Tables 4 and 5 contain the responses to those questions, sorted from most common to least common response.

Pertinent to this study, seven out of 754 parents (only 0.9 percent) said that “higher standardized test scores” was the “second most important reason” for choosing a private school. Only 21 out of 754 parents (2.8 percent)

**TABLE 5** Third most important reason for choosing a private school for my child

|  | Percent |
|--|---------|
| Better learning environment  | 14.5%   |
| Smaller class sizes  | 13.1%   |
| More individual attention for my child   | 11.5%   |
| Better preparation for college   | 7.6%    |
| Better student discipline  | 6.6%    |
| Better education   | 5.7%    |
| Better teachers  | 5.0%    |
| Improved student safety  | 4.8%    |
| Religious education  | 4.6%    |
| More responsive teachers and administrators                                    | 4.5%    |
| Other students would be a better influence on my child                         | 3.3%    |
| Greater sense of community   | 3.1%    |
| More attention to the unique needs of my child                                 | 2.9%    |
| Higher standardized test scores  | 2.8%    |
| Greater respect for my rights as a parent                                      | 1.6%    |
| Other parents would be more concerned about their children’s education         | 1.3%    |
| Less gang activity   | 1.2%    |
| Other  | 1.2%    |
| More tutorial and other supplemental learning services than at a public school | 0.8%    |
| More meaningful opportunities for parental involvement                         | 0.8%    |
| More extracurricular opportunities   | 0.7%    |
| Less time wasted during the school day   | 0.7%    |

**TABLE 6** Top three reasons for choosing a private school for my child

|  | Percent |
|--|---------|
| Better student discipline  | 40.3%   |
| Improved student safety  | 37.7%   |
| Better learning environment  | 31.6%   |
| Better education   | 28.9%   |
| Smaller class sizes  | 25.9%   |
| More individual attention for my child   | 23.2%   |
| Religious education  | 21.0%   |
| Better preparation for college   | 15.8%   |
| Greater sense of community   | 15.5%   |
| Better teachers  | 13.7%   |
| More responsive teachers and administrators                                    | 10.2%   |
| More attention to the unique needs of my child                                 | 6.9%    |
| Other students would be a better influence on my child                         | 5.8%    |
| Higher standardized test scores  | 4.2%    |
| Other parents would be more concerned about their children’s education         | 3.8%    |
| Greater respect for my rights as a parent                                      | 3.1%    |
| More extracurricular opportunities   | 2.0%    |
| More tutorial and other supplemental learning services than at a public school | 2.0%    |
| Less gang activity   | 1.9%    |
| Other  | 1.9%    |
| Less time wasted during the school day   | 1.3%    |
| More meaningful opportunities for parental involvement                         | 1.1%    |

**TABLE 7** Top five reasons for choosing a private school for my child

|  | Percent |
|--|---------|
| Better student discipline  | 50.9%   |
| Better learning environment  | 50.8%   |
| Smaller class sizes  | 48.9%   |
| Improved student safety  | 46.8%   |
| More individual attention for my child   | 39.3%   |
| Better education   | 36.9%   |
| Better preparation for college   | 31.7%   |
| Religious education  | 29.7%   |
| More responsive teachers and administrators                                    | 23.2%   |
| Greater sense of community   | 22.1%   |
| Better teachers  | 20.3%   |
| More attention to the unique needs of my child                                 | 14.1%   |
| Other students would be a better influence on my child                         | 13.8%   |
| Higher standardized test scores  | 10.2%   |
| Other parents would be more concerned about their children's education         | 8.5%    |
| Greater respect for my rights as a parent                                      | 7.4%    |
| More extracurricular opportunities   | 6.9%    |
| Less gang activity   | 6.6%    |
| Less time wasted during the school day   | 5.3%    |
| More meaningful opportunities for parental involvement                         | 4.6%    |
| More tutorial and other supplemental learning services than at a public school | 4.4%    |
| Other  | 2.7%    |

said “higher standardized test scores” was the “third most important reason.”

Table 6 (previous page) analyzes the combined top three reasons for choosing a private school, listing them from most common to least common responses.

Among the survey respondents, there was a very wide heterogeneity in reasons for choosing a private school. The two most common to be listed among the “top three reasons” for choosing a private school were “better student discipline” (40.3 percent) and “improved school safety” (37.7 percent).

Based on the survey results, it appears school climate and classroom management are at or near the top of the reasons why GOAL scholarship parents chose a private school for their child. The term “school climate” is routinely used in education policy discussions and connotes the safety, order, and geniality of the school environment.

“ (In public school) [m]y daughter was bullied, verbally abused, and poorly treated by students, and teachers did not defend or protect her. She was a top student in her class, but the teachers could not keep her occupied with work and ignored her desire to excel.

—GOAL Survey Parent

The other reasons that garnered more than 20 percent of the parents were “better learning environment” (31.6 percent), “better education” (28.9 percent), “smaller class sizes” (25.9 percent), “more individual attention for my child” (23.2 percent), and “religious education” (21 percent). Thus, seven different items were considered as one of the “top three reasons” for choosing their private school by at least 20 percent of GOAL scholarship parents. This finding provides further evidence parents have a variety of different reasons for choosing a private school.

Only 4.2 percent of parents listed “higher standardized test scores” as one of their “top three reasons” for choosing a private school.

Parent concern about school climate and classroom management is further evidenced by Table 7, which displays the percent of parents who listed each reason as one of their “top five reasons” for choosing a private school. Of the seven items chosen by at least 20 percent of GOAL scholarship parents to be among their “top five reasons” for choosing a private school, the top five have a direct impact on the ability of a student to learn in an orderly, safe, and attentive classroom.

“My child was robbed of his opportunity to learn on a daily basis by children who were out of control and disruptive. Learning is challenging for him and he needs structure and a controlled environment. It is unfortunate that we had to sacrifice financially to remove him from public school mainly because of this reason.

—GOAL Survey Parent

“Higher standardized test scores” was among the “top five reasons” for 10.2 percent of parents, placing this item in 14th place among the 21 listed reasons for choosing a private school. In contrast, just more than 50 percent of parents placed “better student discipline” or “better learning environment” as one of their “top five reasons” for choosing a private school.

## Differences across Demographic Groups and Urbanicity

In this subsection we highlight the differences in the responses among demographic groups and among urban, suburban, and rural residents—what social scientists term “urbanicity.”

The GOAL scholarship parents surveyed are overwhelmingly low- and middle-income. However, some school choice opponents maintain that low-income parents lack the capacity to make good decisions about the best schools for their children. To analyze that issue, survey parents are separated into two groups: “high-income” and “low-income.” High-income is defined as families with household incomes of \$60,000 per year and above. Low-income is defined as household incomes less than \$60,000. We do not mean to imply that an income of \$60,000 makes a household with children wealthy. Nevertheless, that is a relatively high income for recipients of GOAL scholarships.

There are only small differences across demographic groups in the most important reasons why parents chose a private school for their children:

- For high-income families, 67.4 percent said a “better learning environment” or a “better education” was among their top two for the most important reasons why they chose a private school for their child. The corresponding percentage for low-income families was 69.5 percent.
- Lower-income parents were more likely to say that a “religious education” was one of the top two reasons why they chose a private school for their children—41.9 percent versus 37.8 percent for higher-income parents.
- Parents without a college degree were more likely to list a “better education” as one of their top two reasons for choosing a private school—48.7 percent for parents with less than a college degree versus 42.6 percent for parents with a college degree.
- Perhaps reflecting the fact that many unmarried parents live in school attendance zones with low-quality public schools, 36.5 percent of unmarried parents listed a “better education” as their most important reason for choosing a private school for their child, compared with 25.2 percent for married parents.
- Parents identified as neither white nor Asian, many of whom do not have access to good public schools, placed more emphasis on the importance of securing a “better education” for their child than did white and Asian parents, with 40.5 percent of the former listing it as their top reason for choosing a private school versus 23.7 percent in the case of white and Asian parents.
- White and Asian parents were more likely to say that “religious education” was their most important reason for choosing a private school (32.6 percent) versus 26.9 percent for others.

With regard to urbanicity, urban and suburban parents

had strikingly similar top reasons for choosing private schools for their children. In order, their top three reasons were “better education,” “religious education,” and, in a distant third, “better learning environment.” Rural residents were 10 percentage points more likely than urban and suburban residents to say a “religious education” was the most important reason they chose a private school for their children.

“ [The private school] provides community... like one big family (meaning love and support for my child), she is learning biblical principles for living before God and living in character with others. It provides fun, active, effective learning experiences through a wide variety of modalities. It provides knowledgeable, competent, compassionate teachers to invest in her.

—GOAL Survey Parent

## Summary of Survey Results Regarding Why Parents Chose a Private School

Based on the answers to the question about the reasons for choosing a private school and the questions asking for the most important of those reasons, GOAL scholarship parents have revealed that they most value a safe school climate and effective classroom management, including “better student discipline” (50.9 percent), “better learning environment” (50.8 percent), “smaller class sizes” (48.9 percent), “improved student safety” (46.8 percent), and “more individual attention for my child” (39.3 percent).

Answers to that series of questions about why parents chose the schools they did provide strong evidence parents value a variety of school attributes, that different parents value different aspects of private schools, and that standardized test scores are a lower priority (outside of the top five) for about 90 percent of parents surveyed.

The survey responses in this area are evidence that low-income, less-educated, unmarried, traditionally disadvantaged, or urban or rural parents have roughly the same reasons for sending their children to private schools as other parents. In fact, unmarried parents and parents from traditionally disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups were more likely to list a “better education” as the most important reason why they chose a private school for their child. Again, perhaps their lack of access to quality public schools significantly motivates unmarried parents and nonwhite and non-Asian parents to take the private school selection process very seriously.

## What Information Do Parents Wish to Consider When Choosing a Private School for Their Child?

The second main question addressed by this paper is:

To enable parents to make informed choices regarding the education of their children, what information should private schools provide to them and to the community at large?

To address that question, the survey contained a second set of questions asking parents to list and prioritize the information they would consider important in deciding about a private school for their child. The first information question in the survey was:

*“If your family had to move to another community in Georgia and select another private school for your child to attend, please select which of the following pieces of information about the private schools in your new community you would consider to be important in helping you select the best private school for your child (assuming cost is not a factor). (You may mark as many or as few options as you like.)*

*“If I were choosing from among affordable private schools for my child or children, I would seek the*

*following information to help me decide which private school to choose:*

Table 8 lists the percentage of parents who would consider each particular piece of information to be “important.” As is evidenced in Table 8, GOAL scholarship parents consider a variety of information as important to their choice of education for their children. At least 20 percent of respondent parents consider 19 of the 21 possible pieces of information to be “important” in deciding which private school to send their children. The four pieces of information that had the highest percentage of parents suggesting them as important were “ratio of students per teacher and the average class size” (84.2 percent), evidence the school is accredited (70.2 percent), the “curriculum and course descriptions” (69.9 percent), and the “percentage of students who are accepted and attend college” (61.3 percent).<sup>31</sup>

Information about “average performance on standardized tests by students in different grades” came in sixth place at 52.8 percent, a somewhat low ranking relative to the disproportionate emphasis that many educators, politicians, policymakers, business leaders, and the media are placing on national standards and standardized testing.

Analogous to the “reasons for choosing a private school” as previously discussed, there may be more useful information in the questions that ask parents to prioritize which information about schools is most important to them when making decisions where to send their children to school. There was a wide variety of responses given by parents as to their first, second, third, fourth, and fifth most important pieces of information about schools they would find important. Tables 9 and 10 (next page) show the percent of parents who list each piece of information as the most and second most important, respectively.

As shown in Tables 9 and 10, there is a somewhat wide divergence among parents as to what are the two most important pieces of information about schools. As to the most important piece of information, 21.1 percent of parents would want to know whether the private school teaches their religion or any religion with which they

**TABLE 8** What information about private schools is important in helping select the best private school for your child?

|   | Percent |
|---|---------|
| The ratio of students per teacher and the average class size                                    | 84.2%   |
| Evidence that the school is accredited by a recognized school accrediting agency                | 70.2%   |
| The curriculum (i.e., content of instructional areas) and course descriptions                   | 69.9%   |
| The percentage of students who are accepted and attend college                                  | 61.3%   |
| Whether the private school teaches your religion or any religion with which you are comfortable | 56.0%   |
| The average performance on standardized tests by students in different grades                   | 52.8%   |
| The graduation rate for students attending the school   | 48.4%   |
| The disciplinary policy of the school   | 45.9%   |
| The years of teaching experience and credentials of the teachers at the school                  | 45.4%   |
| Evidence that the private school teaches character education                                    | 43.6%   |
| The quality and availability of extracurricular activities                                      | 37.8%   |
| The colleges attended by graduates of the school  | 37.4%   |
| The financial condition of the school   | 36.2%   |
| Whether parents have access to the head of school to express any concerns                       | 32.5%   |
| Whether students have access to tablet, laptop, and classroom computers                         | 24.4%   |
| The percent of teachers and administrators who leave from year-to-year                          | 23.7%   |
| Whether computers are used effectively in classroom instruction                                 | 23.2%   |
| The frequency and nature of disciplinary actions  | 23.1%   |
| The racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic makeup of the student population                          | 21.5%   |
| The governance of the school, including the members of the board of trustees                    | 19.1%   |
| The duration of the school year and the hours spent by the students in class                    | 14.6%   |
| Other   | 3.1%    |

**TABLE 9** What information about private schools is most important in helping select the best private school for your child?

|   | Percent |
|---|---------|
| Whether the private school teaches your religion or any religion with which you are comfortable | 21.1%   |
| Evidence that the school is accredited by a recognized school accrediting agency                | 18.4%   |
| The ratio of students per teacher and the average class size                                    | 15.6%   |
| The curriculum (i.e., content of instructional areas) and course descriptions                   | 11.0%   |
| The graduation rate for students attending the school   | 8.8%    |
| The percentage of students who are accepted and attend college                                  | 6.0%    |
| The average performance on standardized tests by students in different grades                   | 5.4%    |
| Evidence that the private school teaches character education                                    | 2.9%    |
| The years of teaching experience and credentials of the teachers at the school                  | 2.8%    |
| The disciplinary policy of the school   | 1.6%    |
| The colleges attended by graduates of the school  | 1.5%    |
| Other   | 1.5%    |
| The racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic makeup of the student population                          | 0.7%    |
| The percent of teachers and administrators who leave from year-to-year                          | 0.5%    |
| Whether students have access to tablet, laptop, and classroom computers                         | 0.5%    |
| Whether computers are used effectively in classroom instruction                                 | 0.4%    |
| The frequency and nature of disciplinary actions  | 0.4%    |
| Whether parents have access to the head of school to express any concerns                       | 0.4%    |
| The financial condition of the school   | 0.3%    |
| The governance of the school, including the members of the board of trustees                    | 0.3%    |
| The duration of the school year and the hours spent by the students in class                    | 0.0%    |
| The quality and availability of extracurricular activities                                      | 0.0%    |

**TABLE 10** What information about private schools is second most important in helping select the best private school for your child?

|   | Percent |
|---|---------|
| The ratio of students per teacher and the average class size                                    | 16.7%   |
| The curriculum (i.e., content of instructional areas) and course descriptions                   | 14.6%   |
| Evidence that the school is accredited by a recognized school accrediting agency                | 9.9%    |
| The percentage of students who are accepted and attend college                                  | 7.7%    |
| Whether the private school teaches your religion or any religion with which you are comfortable | 7.7%    |
| The years of teaching experience and credentials of the teachers at the school                  | 6.4%    |
| The average performance on standardized tests by students in different grades                   | 6.2%    |
| Evidence that the private school teaches character education                                    | 6.0%    |
| The graduation rate for students attending the school   | 5.8%    |
| The colleges attended by graduates of the school  | 4.5%    |
| The disciplinary policy of the school   | 3.1%    |
| The frequency and nature of disciplinary actions  | 2.0%    |
| The racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic makeup of the student population                          | 1.6%    |
| The financial condition of the school   | 1.3%    |
| Whether parents have access to the head of school to express any concerns                       | 1.2%    |
| The percent of teachers and administrators who leave from year-to-year                          | 1.1%    |
| Whether computers are used effectively in classroom instruction                                 | 1.1%    |
| Whether students have access to tablet, laptop, and classroom computers                         | 0.8%    |
| The quality and availability of extracurricular activities                                      | 0.8%    |
| Other   | 0.4%    |
| The duration of the school year and the hours spent by the students in class                    | 0.3%    |
| The governance of the school, including the members of the board of trustees                    | 0.1%    |

are comfortable, while 18.4 percent of parents believe evidence that the school is accredited is the most important piece of information. The “ratio of students per teacher and the average class size” (15.6 percent) and the “curriculum and course descriptions” (11 percent) were the only other two pieces of information that were listed by more than 10 percent of parents as the most important.

There is an even wider dispersion in answers regarding the “second most important” piece of information about private schools. Ten of the choices garnered at least 4.5 percent of parents indicating it was the second most important piece of information. The most common responses for the second most important piece of information were “ratio of students per teacher and the average class size” (16.7 percent) and the “curriculum and course descriptions” (14.6 percent). Average test scores placed seventh, with 6.2 percent of parents rating that piece of information as the second most important.

“ I would look for a school that meets the unique needs of my daughter, teaching methods that are tailored to an individual child’s needs, a community environment where social responsibility and self-advocacy is taught and practiced regularly and methodically, and teachers who are trained and have the experience and desire to work with children who have unique learning differences and needs.

—GOAL Survey Parent

Opponents of school choice often suggest parents will choose schools so that their children are in schools that are homogeneous with respect to race and ethnicity. The survey results do not support that assertion. Only 0.7 percent of parents (five out of 754) listed “the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic makeup of the student population” as the most important piece of information in helping them to select a private school for their children—only 1.6 percent chose that piece

of information as the second most important piece of information.<sup>32</sup>

## Differences in Information Desired across Demographic Groups and Urbanicity

Higher-income and lower-income parents have very similar responses on the top four pieces of information they most desire about private schools—the top four in Tables 9 and 10. However, there is an interesting difference across income. Lower-income parents are more likely to place high school graduation and post-secondary information in their top two pieces of information—relative to higher-income parents. Specifically, as their top two pieces of information about private schools, 19.1 percent of lower-income parents listed either the graduation rate of students attending the school, the percentage of students who are accepted or attend college, or the colleges attended by the graduates of the school. The corresponding percentage for higher-income parents was only 12.1 percent. Lower-income parents are also more likely to place those pieces of information as among their top five.

There is a similar pattern by educational attainment—40.7 percent of parents who do not have a college degree place those graduation and post-secondary pieces of information in their top two, whereas only 31.5 percent of college graduates do so. And, there is a similar pattern by marital status. Forty-four percent of unmarried parents place those graduation and post-secondary pieces of information in their top two, as compared with only 30.9 percent of married parents.

The corresponding percentages are even more different across racial and ethnic groups. Nonwhites and non-Asians are twice as likely to place high school graduation and post-secondary information in their top two desired pieces of information from private schools that would help them make decisions on where to send their children to school. Of those parents from traditionally disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups, 54.1 percent place that information in their top two, whereas only 27 percent of white and Asian parents do so.

The fact that their children are statistically less likely to graduate from high school and attend college may be one possible explanation why parents who are lower-income, less-educated, unmarried, and from historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups are more interested in securing information that addresses their concern that their children graduate from high school and attend college. To be clear, it is not only the case that parents in those demographic categories place a high priority on that information; the survey indicates that higher-income, married, college-educated, white and Asian parents also place a high priority on information about high school graduation rates and post-secondary outcomes. Also, relative to rural and suburban parents, parents in urban areas are also much more likely to place a higher priority on that information.

“ Our current (private) school provides an environment that is more conducive to learning and also provides a curriculum that will make it highly possible for college attendance.

—GOAL Survey Parent

## Would a More Efficient Spontaneous Education Order Arise through Informed Parental Choices?

The third major question addressed by this study is:

If state and local governments empowered parents to educate their children in the public or private schools of their choice, and parents were able to secure relevant information relating to those choices, would a more efficient spontaneous education order arise?

To address that question, we asked parents (1) what steps they would take to obtain information about prospective schools if they moved to a new community, (2) their level of confidence in obtaining their desired

information, and (3) whether they would impose a market penalty on private schools that declined to provide their desired information.

This section contains the survey results for each of those three questions and provides a discussion of how policymakers could facilitate the creation of a spontaneous education order.

### What Steps Would Parents Take to Obtain Information about Prospective Schools?

In the previous section, survey results revealed that, when deciding on which private school to send their children, parents desire a wide variety of information. Also, different parents emphasize different pieces of information. This section of the report examines how parents, if facing a move to another community and the need to select a private school, would obtain the information about possible private schools. Specifically, parents of GOAL scholarship recipients were asked:

*“In order to obtain the desired information (indicated in Question 3), and to make my decision, I would (you may mark as many or as few options as you like):”*

The survey contained eight potential steps parents could take to obtain their desired information about private schools. In addition, parents could indicate they would take “other” steps to obtain information and could specify what those steps would be.

Table 11 (next page) shows the percentage of parents who said they would take each step to obtain information about schools.

Each of the possible eight steps was mentioned by at least 48 percent of parents. The most common step parents would take to gain information was to “ask to tour the school” (92.8 percent). The second most common step taken by parents would be to “ask neighbors, friends, relatives, or other parents for their views” (77.9 percent).



**TABLE 11** What steps would you take to get desired information about private schools?

|  | Percent |
|--|---------|
| Ask to tour the school   | 92.8%   |
| Ask neighbors, friends, relatives, or other parents for their views          | 77.9%   |
| Attend an information meeting for potential families sponsored by the school | 76.5%   |
| Review the school website in detail  | 72.7%   |
| Review information available on the internet                                 | 65.0%   |
| Ask to observe a class being taught  | 57.2%   |
| Ask to meet privately with the head of school                                | 49.2%   |
| Determine how convenient the private school is to where I live               | 48.0%   |
| Other  | 2.0%    |

### Whether the Steps Parents Would Take to Gain Information about Schools Vary across Demographic Groups and Urbanicity

The survey results indicated that parents who are considered to be disadvantaged are willing to take about as many affirmative steps to gain the necessary private school information as parents having higher incomes. Relevant findings include:

- Higher-income parents, college-educated parents, married parents, and white and Asian parents are slightly more likely to take more steps to gain the information they desire about schools, with higher-income parents indicating that, on average, they would take 5.3 of the eight positive steps to gain information, whereas low-income parents indicated they would take 4.8 steps.
- On average, college-educated parents indicated they would take 5.0 steps, whereas those with less

than a college diploma indicated they would take 4.6 steps. Married, white and Asian parents indicated they would take 4.9 steps, whereas unmarried, nonwhite and non-Asian parents indicated they would take 4.8 steps.

- Suburban parents indicated they would take 5.0 steps, on average, whereas rural and urban parents indicated they would take “only” 4.7 steps.
- Perhaps because of the lack of adequate public and private school options in their neighborhoods relative to the neighborhoods in which higher-income families live, only 38 percent of lower-income parents would seek information about the convenience of the possible private schools as compared with 57.4 percent of higher-income parents.

### Summary of Survey Results Regarding Steps Parents Would Take to Gain Information

The survey results pertaining to the information parents would seek about possible private school options for their children, and the steps they would take to secure that information, suggest the parents of all GOAL scholarship recipients desire a great deal of information and will actively seek it. Obviously, to attract families, private schools and any other schools of choice have an incentive to provide the information desired by parents.

### Ability of Parents to Obtain Desired Information

Respondent parents indicated they are very confident they could obtain the desired information about possible private schools to which they might send their children. Specifically, as shown in Table 12 (next page), 83.3 percent of parents agreed that, “I believe I could typically get enough information to make an informed decision.”

**TABLE 12** Confidence in obtaining desired information on my own

| Response   | Percent |
|--|---------|
| I believe I could typically get enough information to make an informed decision                              | 83.3%   |
| Unless the private school provided me additional information, I would be unable to make an informed decision | 16.7%   |

Nevertheless, Table 13 shows 79.2 percent of parents indicated that, if a private school declined to provide them “with some of your desired information,” that “*would* impact” their decision about where to send their children to school (emphasis added). An additional 20 percent of parents said it “*might* impact my decision” (emphasis added). Only 0.8 percent (six out of 754 parents) of parents indicated that, if a private school declined to provide them with some of the information they desired, it would not impact their school choice.

**TABLE 13** If a private school declined to provide you with some of your desired information, would it impact your decision?

| Response                        | Percent |
|---------------------------------|---------|
| It would impact my decision     | 79.2%   |
| It might impact my decision     | 20.0%   |
| It would not impact my decision | 0.8%    |

Interestingly, the survey results indicate that lower-income parents and urban residents would view less favorably the failure of a private school to provide them with some of the information they desired than would be the case for other groups.

### Summary of Survey Results Regarding Whether Schools Failing to Provide Some Information Desired by Parents Would Impact Parent Decisions

Not only are parents of GOAL scholarship recipients eager consumers of information who are willing to demand relevant information about private schools,

but the failure of those schools to provide some of the information would (79.2 percent) or might (20 percent) impact where they would send their children to school. Parents in urban areas and of low socioeconomic status are more demanding in that respect than are other parents.

Overall, the survey results suggest low- and middle-income parents of GOAL scholarship recipients are active consumers of K–12 education for their children. That is:

- Parents desire a large variety of information to help them make decisions about where to send their children to school, especially information about student well-being, classroom environment, and shared values.
- Standardized test scores are not among the pieces of information parents highly desire or use as a basis for choosing a private school.
- Parents are willing to take several time-consuming steps to obtain that information.
- Schools that refuse to provide some of the information desired by parents would likely suffer losses in enrollment, as virtually all parents indicated that, if a school was not forthcoming with some of their desired information, it would or might impact their decision on whether to send their children to that school.

The survey results are evidence that low- and middle-income parents desire to make informed decisions regarding the education of their children in private schools. Thus, it is likely that, if parents had unfettered access to the desired information and the financial ability to send their children to the schools of their choice, a new and spontaneous education order would arise.

### Creation of a Spontaneous Education Order

Based, in part, on the results of the 2013 GOAL Parent Survey, instead of burdening private schools

that participate in school choice programs with unnecessary regulations (e.g., “rules of organization”), policymakers should be empowering informed parents to make the best choices for the education of their children that meet their unique needs and goals (e.g., “rules of just conduct”).<sup>33</sup> Doing so could result in a spontaneous education order, which would emerge from a combination of self-interested parents using available information about schools to pursue the best interests of their children without public officials intentionally trying to create an educational order through centralized planning.

It was the Austrian economist, Friedrich Hayek, who distinguished between rules of just conduct and rules of organization.<sup>34</sup> According to Hayek, “a condition of liberty in which all are allowed to use their knowledge for their purposes, restrained only by rules of just conduct of universal application, is likely to produce for them the best conditions for achieving their aims.”<sup>35</sup> In his view, law is to “consist of abstract rules which make possible the formation of a spontaneous order by the free action of individuals” and is not to be “the instrument of arrangement or organization by which the individual is made to serve concrete purposes.”<sup>36</sup>

In Hayek’s view, rules of just conduct:

- consist of basic laws,
- are generated over time,
- help solve recurring problem situations,
- provide individuals and groups with “ground rules,”
- help create a “spontaneous order,”
- facilitate people using knowledge to pursue their interests, and
- maximize opportunities for all people.

Hayek distinguished rules of just conduct from rules of organization, which:

- consist of detailed rules and regulations,
- are generated as desired by those in control of government,
- are designed to achieve particular results,
- limit opportunities for individuals and groups to use knowledge to pursue their interests, and
- are implemented by government bureaucracies.

In Hayek’s opinion, those in power tend to pursue security at the expense of liberty and to adopt rules of organization that produce a particular result more quickly than would be the case if individuals were free to pursue their interests in the framework of rules of just conduct that evolve as needed. Hayek maintained that the proper role of government is not the direct satisfaction of any particular needs, but the securing of conditions in which individuals and smaller groups will have favorable opportunities of mutually providing for their respective needs. The idea that government can determine the opportunities for all, and especially that it can ensure they are the same for all, is in conflict with the whole rationale of a free society.<sup>37</sup>

Under education policy adhering to *rules of organization*:

- Government officials view parents and society as sharing responsibility for the education of children;
- government officials have particular outcomes they want to achieve in educating the nation’s children, such as college or career readiness and civic responsibility;
- government officials expect parents to educate their children in a manner that conforms with the government’s existing idea of what constitutes an adequate education;
- government officials compel parents to secure an adequate education for their children that

conforms with government standards and curricular content;

- government officials assess student backgrounds, abilities, and outcomes and require remedial academic interventions and, if necessary, psychological or psychiatric counseling and treatment; and
- government officials only provide funding to parents who send their children to government-run schools or to private schools that agree to operate according to the strictures of the rules of organization and the resulting bureaucratization.

Alternatively, under education policy respecting the *rules of just conduct*:

- Parents are respected as the primary educators of their children;
- if parents are unable to provide or afford an adequate education for their children, then nonprofit or for-profit educational organizations create free or reduced-tuition schools;
- if educational organizations do not create enough free or reduced-tuition schools, then the government provides funding to parents to use at the schools of their choice; and
- if parents choose educational options that are anti-democratic or place their children at risk, then rules of organization could be enacted to remedy the situation, such as requiring public and private schools accepting families with government funding to be accredited by a recognized independent agency.<sup>38</sup>

Of course, the creation of a spontaneous education order depends in significant part on the ability of parents to access the types of information about schools that participants in the 2013 GOAL Parent Survey indicated were important to their decision-making process. According to Michael Polanyi, a peer of Hayek's who also theorized about the nature of spontaneous orders:

An aggregate of individual initiatives can lead to the establishment of a spontaneous order only if each takes into account in its action what the others have done in the same context before. Where large numbers are involved, such mutual adjustment must be indirect; each individual adjusts himself to a state of affairs resulting from the foregoing actions of the rest. This requires that information about the state of affairs in question should be available to each member of the aggregate; as in the case of such communal states of affairs as the condition of various markets, the current achievements of scientific progress, or the position of the law up to date.<sup>39</sup>

Under rules of just conduct respecting the role of parents as the primary educators of their children, public and private schools seeking to attract families would have the incentive to provide relevant information about their schools. Rather than adopting rules of organization that would require schools to publish such information, government officials could encourage nonprofit or for-profit organizations to create and operate online information exchanges in which parents, public and private schools, and the broader public could participate.

One example of such an online information exchange is GreatSchools, a national nonprofit, the website of which, GreatSchools.org, helps families make crucial decisions about where to live and where to send their children to school. With profiles of 200,000 public and private schools and more than one million parent ratings and reviews, GreatSchools.org is the nation's leading guide to pre-K–12 schools.<sup>40</sup> On March 13, 2013, the Walton Family Foundation announced that it is investing \$7.5 million in GreatSchools over the next three years to support the localization of its school ratings website and expand on-the-ground efforts. With that investment, GreatSchools will expand crowdsourced reviews from parents and community members to more than half of the schools on the site.<sup>41</sup>

Private School Review is another online information exchange to which parents can refer in deciding where to send their children to school.<sup>42</sup>

At the state level, Private School Innovator (PSI) has

created an online resource to assist Massachusetts parents in securing information that will help them choose the private schools best suited for their children. PSI's goal is to provide its members with the tools they need to not only find the right school but manage the admissions process more efficiently. It has created a "one-stop shop" to help discover, compare, and apply to private schools in Massachusetts and New England with one easy-to-navigate website.<sup>43</sup>

Likewise, independent school associations in each state could create online information exchanges in which their member schools could participate.

Under rules of just conduct, it would be up to each private school to decide whether, and to what extent, to participate in one or more online information exchanges. If a school chose not to do so, potential applicants to the school could rely on school visits, the school website, word of mouth, and other means for insights about the school and then decide whether and how much to factor the school's non-participation into their decision-making process. The parents who responded to the survey indicate the schools that did not provide even some of the substantial amount of information that is desired would likely face a market penalty through decreased enrollments.

## **Parents as Active Education Consumers Who May Transform Private K–12 Education and Help Build a Spontaneous Education Order**

There have been a few studies that have asked parents how they choose schools for their children. In this section, we highlight the similarities, point out additions to the literature from the 2013 GOAL Parent Survey, and note that, as parents have greater access to school information sources, a spontaneous education order is likely to change what parents value in schools. Although we do not discuss the entire literature on how parents choose schools, we mention studies that are representative of that literature.

## **Similarities among Studies that Survey Parents about Schooling Choices**

Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan surveyed 800 parents in Washington, D.C., Denver, and Milwaukee who had incomes of \$50,000 or less. About 81 percent of those parents had children who were enrolled in a public school, with most of the rest having children who were in a private school. The remaining children were homeschooled.<sup>44</sup>

Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan found those low- and middle-income parents tended to be active school consumers who were willing to take multiple steps to find the best school for their children. They found that parents with less than a high school diploma and very low incomes (less than \$20,000) were a bit less likely to take affirmative steps to search for schools. Specifically, parents with less than a high school diploma took, on average, one-half of an affirmative step less in gathering information and searching for schools than parents with at least a high school diploma. Very low-income parents took 0.6 fewer steps than higher income parents. Nevertheless, almost all parents in their survey took multiple steps to find the best school for their children.

Regarding aspects of schools valued by parents, Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan found school safety was of primary importance to parents. They cared secondly about school quality. Based on their survey results and on the discussion the researchers heard from focus groups of the survey respondents, Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan found:

These urban parents clearly care about academic quality and performance of schools, but they mostly do not use test scores as a strong metric for that. They prefer their own observations of the school in action and the sense of reputation they gather from word of mouth ("soft data"). Indeed, most of the factors that parents use in selecting schools are not readily conveyed on paper or on a website. Instead, the factors important to them are less tangible and, hence, better conveyed through discussion with other parents with similar concerns, values, or experiences.<sup>45</sup>

Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan also found transportation to school was a significant issue for the low- and middle-income parents in their survey. Those parents said they were reluctant to send their children a long distance to school given the cost or lack of transportation. Of course, in large urban school systems, where per-pupil spending often exceeds \$15,000 per student, some of those funds could be used for transportation under universal school choice where all taxpayer funds follow children to the schools of their parents' choice.

Another study that surveyed parents regarding school choices was Wolf and Stewart.<sup>46</sup> Wolf and Stewart surveyed 1,073 Detroit parents, about 90 percent of whom had incomes less than \$50,000. More than 97 percent of the parents surveyed had children who were enrolled in a public school, about 55 percent in a traditional neighborhood public school, and about 42 percent in a public charter, public magnet, or out-of-district public school. They found that parents valued a variety of school attributes, including academics, safety, academic programs, extracurricular activities, and school location. They also found that 79 percent of parents had shopped for schools—despite the fact there were no taxpayer-funded private school choice options available in Detroit at that time. However, there were charter, magnet, and intra-district choice options available within the public education sector.

In a recent national survey of the general population, DiPerna found that mothers of school-aged children had a wide variety of school attributes they considered as the “key attribute” of the school they want for their kids. The most commonly cited key attribute by mothers was better education (15 percent). The second most commonly cited key attribute was class size (10 percent). In third place was individual attention (9 percent). The remaining two-thirds of school moms surveyed listed various other items as the key school attributes for which they were looking.<sup>47</sup>

Zeehandelaar and Winkler surveyed 2,007 parents with children in traditional public, charter, and private schools regarding their preferences over 30 school characteristics and 17 goals they have for

their students. Zeehandelaar and Winkler found that parents had a wide variety of preferences over school attributes and goals for their children. However, a large majority of parents ranked “strong core curriculum in reading and mathematics” and “emphasizes science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education” as high priorities. In addition, large majorities of parents ranked “good study habits and self-discipline,” “strong critical thinking skills,” and “strong verbal and written communication skills” as important goals they had for their children.” Beyond those two school characteristics and three goals, parents had a wide diversity of preferences. Whether schools “prepare students for high-stakes tests” and “high test scores” were ranked only 18th and 19th out of 30 school characteristics.<sup>48</sup>

Like the results of the 2013 GOAL Parent Survey, each of the aforementioned four studies indicates that parents value a wide variety of school attributes. Further, the results in Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan suggest parents prefer word of mouth, school visits, and other means to gauge the academic quality of individual schools, as opposed to standardized test scores.<sup>49</sup>

Hastings and Weinstein provide interesting evidence from two public school choice experiments in North Carolina’s Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public School District. They found that, when parents were given average test score information about individual public schools, parents—even low-income and other disadvantaged parents—were more likely to choose schools with higher test scores.<sup>50</sup> We interpret that evidence as indicating that even disadvantaged parents can and will make good choices when they receive information about attributes of schools.

As the present study and Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan find, parents care about “more than scores” and, in addition, may not consider test scores as the best measure of academic quality.<sup>51</sup> Given the numerous instances of public school administrators and teachers cheating by manipulating students’ tests and the criticism that standardized tests narrow curricula in ways that harm learning, the low- and middle-income parents surveyed may be wise to use

multiple methods to garner information about the academic quality of schools.<sup>52</sup>

## Unique Insights from the 2013 GOAL Parent Survey

There are several differences between the 2013 GOAL Parent Survey and prior studies. For example, the GOAL survey was of parents who had chosen a private school. Previous surveys were exclusively of public school parents or contained a large majority of parents with children enrolled in a public school. Because there is a wider diversity in school types in the private sector, the GOAL survey offered parents a larger array of reasons why they chose a private school and a larger array of possible methods of searching for schools from which to choose relative to the previous surveys.

Further, GOAL survey parents had to actively make a school choice. Those parents could have kept their students at their former public schools. Instead, when given the offer of a GOAL scholarship, they enrolled their children in a private school. Perhaps parents who actually have gone through the exercise of choosing among schools are better able to state their preferences on surveys such as GOAL's.

The largest difference between the present work and the previous literature regards the question of how parents would view a private school that declined to provide them with information they desire. In this study, 79.2 percent of parents indicated that, if a private school declined to provide them “with some of your desired information,” that “*would* impact” their decision about where to send their children to school (emphasis added). An additional 20 percent of parents said it “*might* impact my decision” (emphasis added). Only 0.8 percent (six out of 754 parents) of parents indicated that, if a private school declined to provide them with some of the information they desired, it would not impact their school choice. Those responses indicate private schools would have a very large incentive to provide information desired by parents—or risk losing students to other schools.

## A Spontaneous Education Order May Change Parents' Preferences for Schools

Because of the limited aspects of existing school choices, Merrifield offers a dim outlook regarding what can be learned about school choice from analyzing the current education system or any system that offers only some aspects of true competition and choice.<sup>53</sup> Under the current education system, parents can (1) choose public schools at a zero price or (2) pay all or most of the cost of private schools along with the taxes relating to public schools they do not use. Although there is now some limited choice within the public education sector, public schools are typically local monopolies that have attendance zones so that students who reside inside a given attendance zone have only one public school “choice.” Finally, the fact that a significant majority of private schools are religious in nature also limits the choices of many parents.

The limited choices available under the present American K–12 education system surely impact how parents respond to surveys about what they value in schools, how they search for schools, or how they actually respond to various policy changes. Merrifield suggests it is likely—based on experiences in other countries and in other industries—a true system of school choice will “transform” the private education sector.<sup>54</sup> We agree. There likely will be a much wider array of schooling options for parents available in all sectors, the ultimate nature of which is difficult to predict. As school choice options expand and become more diverse, parents likely will come to value options and pieces of information that do not presently exist.

Since Merrifield's 2008 study, the landscape has improved for evaluating the transformative effects of parental choice in education. In many states, parents have greater access to a variety of options for the K–12 education of their children. The 2013 GOAL Parent Survey is one of the first to survey parents who actually had the opportunity to choose private schools outside of the public education system. Its conclusions—that parents value a variety of school attributes (“more than scores”) and are active consumers of K–12 education—

give credence to Merrifield's suggestion that increased school choice may transform the private education sector. Because, at the early stages of the school choice movement, parents have exhibited the desire and ability to be effective consumers of education, their effectiveness will only increase as private schools work with nonprofit education foundations, policymakers, parents, school choice advocates, researchers, and associations of private independent schools to develop more channels for providing information to parents.

## Conclusion

Historically, public schools have been the primary vehicle for delivering K–12 education to American children. However, the systemic inability of many “traditional” public schools and school districts, especially in urban areas, to successfully educate their students has prompted parents, educators, politicians, business leaders, and policymakers to consider alternative educational delivery models.

Beyond their long-time concern about the quality of the education their children are receiving in public schools, parents are as, or even more, concerned that children in America are facing a plethora of social and cultural challenges that can have a significant negative impact on their lives and futures. As a result, an increasing number of parents are seeking to enroll their students in private schools and are taking advantage of tax-credit scholarship and voucher programs where available.

Based on the results of the 2013 GOAL Scholarship Parent Survey, GOAL scholarship parents had many reasons for choosing a private school for the K–12 education of their children. The top five reasons why those families chose a private school were all related to a safe school climate and effective classroom management, including better student discipline, better learning environment, smaller class sizes, improved student safety, and more individualized attention for their children. The surveyed parents placed low emphasis on the results of standardized test scores.

Although parents desire a wide variety of information to help them decide where to send their children to school, student performance on standardized test scores is one of the least important pieces of information upon which parents base their decision regarding the private school to which they send their children.

Parents desire to be informed education consumers and, contrary to the assertions of some school choice opponents, low-income, single African-American parents with less than a college education are willing and able to be informed and active education consumers on behalf of their children.

Because they risk losing students to other private schools in the educational marketplace, private schools have an incentive to voluntarily provide the information desired by parents.

Rather than incorrectly assuming parents are concerned primarily about the performance of their children on state standardized tests, state and local officials—when designing and implementing school choice programs—should consider the reasons deemed more important to parents for enrolling their children in private schools.

Meanwhile, parents should inform private schools about the information they deem important in making their decisions regarding the schools to which they send their children, and private schools should govern their operational and family recruitment strategies accordingly.

Nonprofit education foundations, policymakers, parents, school choice advocates, researchers, and associations of private independent schools should (1) communicate about how to build online and privately managed platforms for the publication and sharing of information about private schools that parents deem important to the school selection process and (2) reach consensus on those rules of just conduct that are necessary to build a spontaneous education order and the few rules of organization that will prevent private schools from engaging in anti-democratic practices or



posing a tangible threat to the safety of children.<sup>55</sup>

Specifically:

- Nonprofit education foundations should (1) provide grants to other nonprofit entities to develop and implement online platforms for the publication and sharing of information about the programs, performance, and management of public and private schools at the state and local levels and (2) develop programs that help educate parents on how to secure and use the information they need to become effective consumers of K–12 education for their children.
- Policymakers should (1) educate legislators about the desire of parents to be effective consumers of K–12 education, (2) encourage legislators and state education officials to avoid adopting national standards and student testing mandates or other laws, regulations, and rules that will interfere with the operation of accredited private schools and the rise of a spontaneous education order, and (3) help design and promote model school choice legislation.
- Parents should (1) demand that their elected representatives adopt school choice programs that do not unnecessarily regulate accredited participating private schools, (2) through their school choices, hold accountable those private schools that fail to provide enough information to prospective parents about their schools' educational offerings and outcomes, (3) in making their school choices, use their personal knowledge about the needs of their children, including the unique academic and cultural challenges they may be facing, and (4) honestly consider the degree to which they are responsible for creating the social and cultural conditions facing their children and engage in dialogue with their neighbors, community leaders, religious leaders, and elected officials about taking a “holistic” approach to K–12 education that meets the social and educational needs of children and families.
- School choice advocates should (1) join policymakers in their outreach to legislators in the manner described previously, and (2) organize parents and private school communities, especially those who are participating in voucher or tax-credit scholarship programs, to expand existing school choice offerings and to protect existing school choice programs and accredited private schools from excessive government regulation.
- Researchers should (1) further survey parents about their school choice decision-making processes, information needs, and satisfaction levels, (2) further consider the conditions necessary for the realization of a spontaneous education order in K–12 education in America, (3) in states that have adopted school choice programs that are not overly regulated by the government, examine the degree to which the outcomes reflect a spontaneous education order with which parents are satisfied, and (4) examine the degree to which social and cultural factors negatively impact children and the alternative K–12 education and social service delivery systems that are required to mitigate those impacts.
- Associations of private independent schools should (1) educate their member schools about the importance of operating in a transparent manner that respects and empowers parents to make informed school choice decisions, (2) agree on, design, and implement programs to provide prospective parents with the pieces of information they need to become effective consumers of K–12 private school education, and (3) inform their elected representatives that, in lieu of increased government regulation of private schools, their member private schools are prepared to operate in a more transparent manner so that parents have the information necessary to hold them accountable through their school choices.

## Notes

1. Mikel Holt, "Racine Superintendent Makes Offensive Declaration about Black Parents," *Milwaukee Community Journal*, Mar. 22, 2012, <http://www.communityjournal.net/racine-superintendent-makes-offensive-declaration-about-black-parents/>.

2. "Home," Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program, Inc., accessed Sept. 5, 2013, <http://www.goalscholarship.org>.

3. Information on inflation-adjusted spending comes from National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 2012* (Washington, DC: US Dept. of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), table 213, [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12\\_213.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12_213.asp). All figures are in constant 2011–2012 dollars.

4. "The Battle Over School Choice: Just How Bad Are the Public Schools? Is There a Crisis in American Education?" *FRONTLINE* PBS, 2000, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/vouchers/howbad/crisis.html>.

5. The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, *The ABCs of School Choice: The Comprehensive Guide to Every Private School Choice Program in America*, 2013 ed. (Indianapolis: Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, 2013), <http://www.edchoice.org/Foundation-Services/Publications/2013-ABCs-of-School-Choice.aspx>.

6. Randall K. Filer and Daniel Münich, "Reponses of Private and Public Schools to Voucher Funding," *Economics of Education Review* 34 (2013), pp. 269–85, doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2012.12.004. After examining the impact of a publicly-funded school voucher program implemented in the Czech Republic after the fall of Communism, the authors observe that:

Private schools supported with state funding increased educational opportunity and seemingly spurred public schools to lower class size and, therefore, improve performance. They also spurred public schools to engage in bureaucratic maneuvering designed to preserve their entrenched position. The overall experience of education funding reform in the Czech Republic since the fall of Communism provides support for the theoretical underpinnings of the case for school vouchers. It does, however, also point out how important it is that a funding system be kept simple and leave as little opportunity as possible for discretionary actions on the part of implementing officials if it is to avoid capture by the current school bureaucracy and enable private schools to provide effective competition to state schools' monopoly status. (284)

7. For example, during the 2013 session of the Georgia General Assembly, the Georgia Chamber of Commerce supported the passage of HB 283, which, in addition to adding Student Scholarship Organization transparency and accountability provisions to the Georgia Education Expense tax credit law, raised the annual cap on available K–12 education expense tax credits to \$58 million, [http://www.gachamber.com/gban\\_alert\\_032913/](http://www.gachamber.com/gban_alert_032913/).

8. Joyce A. Martin, Brady E. Hamilton, Stephanie J. Ventura, Michelle J. K. Osterman, and T. J. Matthews, "Births: Final Data for 2011," *National Vital Statistics Reports* 62, no. 1 (June 2013), [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr62/nvsr62\\_01.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr62/nvsr62_01.pdf).

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26. To see if there were large differences between the usable sample of survey respondents (N=754) to those dropped from the sample (N=218), we compared answers of survey respondents who had complete data on all questions (N=754) to the answers of survey respondents who had missing data on one or more questions (N=218). There were no large differences on any of the results reported later in this paper. For example, 56.4 percent of the usable sample said that a better education or religious education was the most important reason why they chose to send their child to a private school. For respondents who were missing at least one piece of information used in this study and who answered this specific question, 54.2 percent gave one of those two reasons as the most important reason why they chose a private school. In another example, 97.2 percent of respondents who were dropped from the sample and who answered this specific question said that if a private school failed to provide them with some of the information they desired that it would or might impact their decision of where to send their children to school. The correspondent percentage for survey respondents with complete data was 98.6 percent.

27. US Census Bureau, *2011 American Community Survey* (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey Office, 2012), table B19119, <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/>. Median family income in Georgia for a four-person family is \$65,851.

28. Information on spending per student in Georgia public schools comes National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics 2012* (Washington, DC: US Dept. of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), table 215, [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12\\_215.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12_215.asp).

29. Adjusted for the average size of GOAL scholarship families (4.1), almost 70 percent of GOAL scholarship families have annual household incomes of \$35,550 or less and more than 39 percent had incomes of \$23,700 or less. The AGI was adjusted for family size using the OECD-modified scale. This scale assigns a value of 1 to the household head, of 0.5 to each additional adult member, and of 0.3 to each child.

30. Georgia parents are familiar with standardized testing and standardized test scores. For more than a decade public schools in Georgia have provided standardized test scores for individual students to their parents annually. In addition, average test scores for public schools, school districts, and the state are published annually on state government and school district websites. See, for example, the K-12 report card information available for every public school and public school district in Georgia at <http://www.gaosa.org>.

31. In light of the fact that some of the GOAL scholarship parents responding to the survey have young children who are attending

private schools that only educate students through the eighth grade, the 61.3 percent of parents who selected information about the "percentage of students who are accepted and attend college" as being important to them may be understating the true importance of this piece of information to parents.

32. It is possible that, regardless of the anonymous nature of the survey, some survey participants may have been hesitant to express a strong desire for information regarding the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic makeup of the student population. Although it is possible that some parents might want that information for unfortunate reasons (e.g., bigotry), it is also possible that some parents might want that information to confirm that their child would be educated in a diverse community or, if a racial or ethnic minority, would have comparable peers. There is evidence that the financial aid offered to families by the Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program has increased the racial and ethnic minority student population at many of the private K-12 schools participating in the program. Overall, the GOAL survey results indicate that parents do not place a high priority on the racial and ethnic compositions of schools relative to many other concerns. In a prior study by Van Dunk and Dickman (2003), the authors concluded that because Milwaukee parents typically do not possess accurate information about the racial and ethnic composition of different schools meant that parents were uninformed consumers of schools in the presence of the Milwaukee voucher program. Perhaps a lack of interest is why those and other parents do not place a high priority on seeking such information.

33. For an excellent analysis of the increased regulatory burdens experienced by private schools that participate in school choice programs, and the different degrees of regulation relating to voucher and tax-credit scholarship programs, see Andrew J. Coulson, "Do Vouchers and Tax Credits Increase Private School Regulation? A Statistical Analysis," *Journal of School Choice* 5, no. 2 (2011), pp. 224-51, doi:10.1080/15582159.2011.576577.

34. Friedrich A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, vol. 1, *Rules and Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

35. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

37. Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, vol. 2, *The Mirage of Social Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

38. Edwin G. West, "The Uneasy Case for State Education," *New Individualist Review* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1966), pp. 38-49, [http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com\\_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=2136&chapter=195438&layout=html&Itemid=27](http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=2136&chapter=195438&layout=html&Itemid=27). As developed by E.G. West, an economist and economic historian specializing in the relationship between the state and the education sector, under the "protection principle," only in cases of extreme negligence that pose a tangible threat to children or society would state and local government agencies be granted the authority to intervene in parents' choices for the education of their children. In his view, creating a government monopoly over public education to ensure the "safe" education of children makes as little sense as would be the case if, in the public interest of making sure parents did not starve or malnourish their children, the government passed laws for compulsory and universal eating, increased taxes to provide children "free" food at local government kitchens or stores, and dictated that parents could only shop for food or feed their children at the government-run food outlets nearest their homes.

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51. See note 44 above.
52. According to an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* investigation, 196 school districts nationwide had evidence of cheating on tests that was similar to the evidence from Atlanta Public Schools. For more information, please see M. B. Pell, "More Cheating Scandals Inevitable, as States Can't Ensure Test Integrity," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Sept. 29, 2012, <http://www.myajc.com/news/news/more-cheating-scandals-inevitable-as-states-cant-e/nSPqj/>.
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54. *Ibid.*
55. GreatSchools and Private School Review, for example, both contain information that is valued by parents of GOAL scholarship students. However, a spontaneous education order that results from school choice would likely lead these information sources and new entrants to provide even more information on individual schools valued by parents, as more parents would be empowered to choose schools for their children.



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Jim Kelly is the founder and General Counsel of Georgia Community Foundation, Inc. He was the primary author of the Georgia Charter Schools Act of 1998 and founder of Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program, Inc., Georgia's largest K–12 student scholarship organization. In 2005, President George W. Bush appointed Jim to serve as a representative on the United States National Commission for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In that capacity, he was appointed by the U.S. State Department to serve for four years as the chairman of the National Commission's Social and Human Sciences Committee. Jim serves as Director of International Affairs for the Washington, D.C.-based Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy Studies. He is a senior fellow at the Georgia Public Policy Foundation. Jim earned a BBA and law degree from the University of Georgia and has earned three Master's degrees in taxation, nonprofit management, and international relations. Jim is married to Lisa Kelly, has two adult daughters, and resides in Alpharetta, Georgia.



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The authors welcome any and all questions related to methods and findings.



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