



Parent Perspectives:

Applicants to North Carolina's Opportunity Scholarship Program Share Their Experiences

OS Evaluation Report #2
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Executive Summary

Overview: Enacted in 2013 and implemented in 2014-15, the North Carolina Opportunity Scholarship Program expands school choice in North Carolina by providing state-funded vouchers for eligible children in Kindergarten through twelfth grade worth up to \$4,200 per student, per year. Despite funding to support over 6,000 students in 2015-16 and the receipt of 5,545 eligible applications, only 3,673 (66 percent) students ultimately used a voucher. This report draws on parent surveys and focus group data to shed light on parents' experiences with the program. The primary findings of that analysis are outlined below.

- The majority of parents indicated that they learned about the Opportunity Scholarship program through informal means, primarily from conversations with friends and relatives. Most reported having little difficulty accessing the information they needed to apply and noted that the application process was easy to navigate.
- Parents' reasons for non-use of an Opportunity Scholarship are diverse, but some patterns stand out. Parents cited hidden or unanticipated costs, such as transportation, as well as breakfast and lunches, which would otherwise be provided free of charge at a traditional public school. Among eligible lottery winners, the top reason cited for non-use of an Opportunity Scholarship was that private school tuition and fees still cost too much, even after subtracting the voucher amount. Even among scholarship-users, parents described numerous strategies for supplementing the scholarship, such as receiving additional financial aid directly from a private school.
- Just under half (45 percent) of parents who applied for but did not end up using an Opportunity Scholarship said they enrolled their children in private schools anyway, and paid for it by self-financing the tuition and fees or by applying for financial aid from another source, such as a scholarship offered by an individual private school. Approximately one-third (32 percent) of non-users reported that their child attended their assigned traditional public school instead, and seven percent reported that their child attended a public charter school.
- Parents of Opportunity Scholarship users appear very satisfied with their child's new school environment, with 94 percent assigning a grade of "A" or "B" to their child's current private school. Conversely, these parents were more likely to assign a grade of "C" or lower to their child's previous public school (73 percent). In terms of specific school characteristics, 71 percent of parents indicated that they were "very satisfied" with school safety and 71 percent said they were "very satisfied" with instruction in character or values. Only 41 percent of parents indicated that they were very satisfied with racial diversity at their chosen private school.
- When asked what proportion of their expenses the Opportunity Scholarship covers at their chosen private school, the majority of parents (79 percent) indicated that they were responsible for some degree of co-payment. In many cases, these expenses were offset by supplemental financial aid

provided by the private schools.

- The most common reason cited for wanting to leave the public school system was school quality, selected by approximately one-third of parents (35 percent). Concerns about school safety were also prevalent, selected by one-quarter of parents (26 percent).
- Ninety-four percent of parents said the educational quality of a private school was a “very important” consideration when choosing which school their child would attend. Only 33 percent of parents said access to extracurricular activities was “very important.”

Introduction

In July 2016, a team of researchers from North Carolina State University traveled across North Carolina to learn more about key stakeholder perceptions of various aspects of the North Carolina Opportunity Scholarship Program, a voluntary, statewide school voucher program for students from lower-income families. During the course of that listening tour, we met with private school leaders, founders, admissions directors, and participating families. The data presented here rely on parent focus groups, specifically. We also distributed an online survey to all families that had applied to the Opportunity Scholarship Program for the 2015-16 and the 2016-17 school years and conducted focus groups and interviews with participating parents in five representative locations across the state to better understand how the program works and how it has impacted participating students and their families. We asked questions about their experiences with the application process and other general questions to ascertain why only a portion of all eligible families actually utilize an Opportunity Scholarship. We also asked about the push and pull factors that motivate parents to transfer their children from the public to the private sector. This report details the major findings from that data collection exercise.

Program Overview

The North Carolina Opportunity Scholarship Program expands school choice in North Carolina by providing state-funded private school vouchers for eligible children in Kindergarten through twelfth grade. Established by North Carolina General Statute 115C-562 in 2013 and administered by the North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority (NCSEAA), the Opportunity Scholarship Program provides up to \$4,200 per year for an eligible student to attend a participating private school.¹ Awards are distributed one semester at a time and can be used for tuition and required fees at registered private schools.

The Opportunity Scholarship Program began in school year 2014-15, providing private school vouchers for 1,216 students to attend 224 private schools.² The program has experienced significant growth every year since then, with 3,460 recipients attending 313 private schools in 2015-16 and 5,432 recipients in 349 private schools in 2016-17.

¹Although the scholarship award has a maximum value of \$4,200, it cannot exceed the cost of tuition and fees, including books, equipment, transportation or other items required by the private school

²These data were published in NCSEAA's annual reports to the North Carolina legislature on the Opportunity Scholarship Program for the 2014-15 and 2015-16 academic years. Retrieved from <http://www.ncleg.net/documentsites/committees/JLEOC/Reports%20Received/2015%20Reports%20Received/Opportunity%20Scholarship%20Program.pdf> and <http://ncga.state.nc.us/documentsites/committees/JLEOC/Reports%20Received/2016%20Reports%20Received/Opportunity%20Scholarship%20Program%20Report%202016.pdf>

Eligibility for the Opportunity Scholarship program is determined by several criteria. First, students must be North Carolina residents living in a household that does not exceed a statutorily-defined income cap, must not have graduated from high school or attended college, and must have turned five years old on or before August 31. The household income eligibility threshold is set at 133 percent of the eligibility threshold for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program for a partial scholarship and is set at 100 percent of the federal free and reduced-price lunch program for a full scholarship. For a family of four, for example, maximum household gross income for 2016 could not exceed \$45,510 if a student applied for a full scholarship or \$60,528 for a partial scholarship.³

Second, students must be enrolled in a public school in North Carolina in the application year, be entering Kindergarten or first grade, or have previously received an Opportunity Scholarship. Students who do not meet any of these second criteria still may be eligible if they are in foster care or were adopted within the last year, or if at least one parent is on fulltime active duty with the military.

Total scholarship funding is set by the state budget. In 2014-15, \$4,635,320 was disbursed in scholarship funds, and in 2015-16, \$13,149,842 was disbursed in scholarship funds. Effective July 1 2017, the 2016 Appropriations Act calls for increasing funds by at least ten million dollars every year for ten years.⁴

When determining which students should receive scholarship funding, the statute dictates that priority must be given to renewal students who previously received a scholarship grant. After the renewal scholarships have been awarded, at least fifty percent of the remaining funds must be used to award grants to students who qualify for the free and reduced-price lunch program. Any remaining funds are distributed among the remaining eligible applicants, with no more than forty percent of the remaining funds directed to students entering Kindergarten or First Grade. Any remaining funds are distributed among the remaining eligible applicants. All Opportunity Scholarship funding is awarded by a lottery system, but winning the lottery does not guarantee enrollment in a private school of choice, as students must apply for admission at their preferred school separately.

To participate in the Opportunity Scholarship program, private schools must satisfy the requirements established by the state's Division of Non-Public Education for all private schools, they must register with NCSEEA, and they must conduct a criminal background check for the employee with the highest decision-making authority. Eligible private schools that receive more than \$300,000 in Opportunity Scholarship funds must submit an annual financial review report that has been prepared by a certified public accountant. Finally, all participating private schools are required to administer a nationally

³See http://www.ncseaa.edu/pdf/OPS_Overview.pdf

⁴See NCSEEA Opportunity Scholarship Program Summary of Data as of 2/1/17. Retrieved from http://www.ncseaa.edu/documents/OPS_Summary_Data.pdf

standardized test of their choosing to all scholarship students annually and to report these results to NCSEAA.

The Opportunity Scholarship program has faced two legal challenges, both of which alleged that the program violates the North Carolina Constitution: *Hart v. North Carolina* and *Richardson v. North Carolina*. Although the trial court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, the North Carolina Supreme Court declared the program constitutional in a 4-3 decision in July 2015.

Methods

The central research questions driving data collection efforts for this report were:

1. How do families receive information about the Opportunity Scholarship program?
2. How do families receive information about private schools that are participating in the Opportunity Scholarship program?
3. Are there differences in parental information access by sub-groups?
4. What are the push and pull factors that influence a parent's decision to transfer a child from the public to the private sector by way of an Opportunity Scholarship?

Data collection occurred through an online survey that was distributed to two waves of parents— all parents/guardians who had applied for the Opportunity Scholarship Program for the 2015-16 school year and for the 2016-17 school year— as well as through focus groups and interviews. The rich data collected from these sources offer a valuable first glimpse into the topics covered by the research questions. Further analysis of administrative data, as it becomes available for future reports, will allow us to delve even deeper.

Survey Development

The process for developing specific survey questions consisted of reviewing the relevant literature to identify questions that could be drawn upon, as well as writing original questions that were specific to the North Carolina context. The final survey instrument consisted of approximately twenty questions and took approximately fifteen minutes to complete. Questions were a mixture of multiple choice with responses on a Likert scale (e.g., Very Dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied, Satisfied, Very Satisfied) and open-response questions. We piloted the survey at North Carolina State University prior to distribution.

Data Collection

Coordinating with NCSEEA, we emailed an invitation to the parents/ guardians of all applicants to the Opportunity Scholarship Program in 2015-16 and 2016-17 to participate in an online survey using the survey software, Qualtrics. The initial email was distributed on October 6, 2016, with five reminder emails distributed to non-respondents throughout the month. Accounting for inactive email addresses, the target sample was 12,894 students, represented by 8,739 parent email addresses, and we achieved 2,425 parent responses, representing a response rate of 28%.

Our parent sample was split between first-time applicants (59 percent) and renewal applicants (41 percent). The majority of parents we surveyed indicated that they were applying for an Opportunity Scholarship for just one child (63 percent). Twenty-six percent indicated that they were applying for Opportunity Scholarships for two children, with the remainder applying for three or more children.

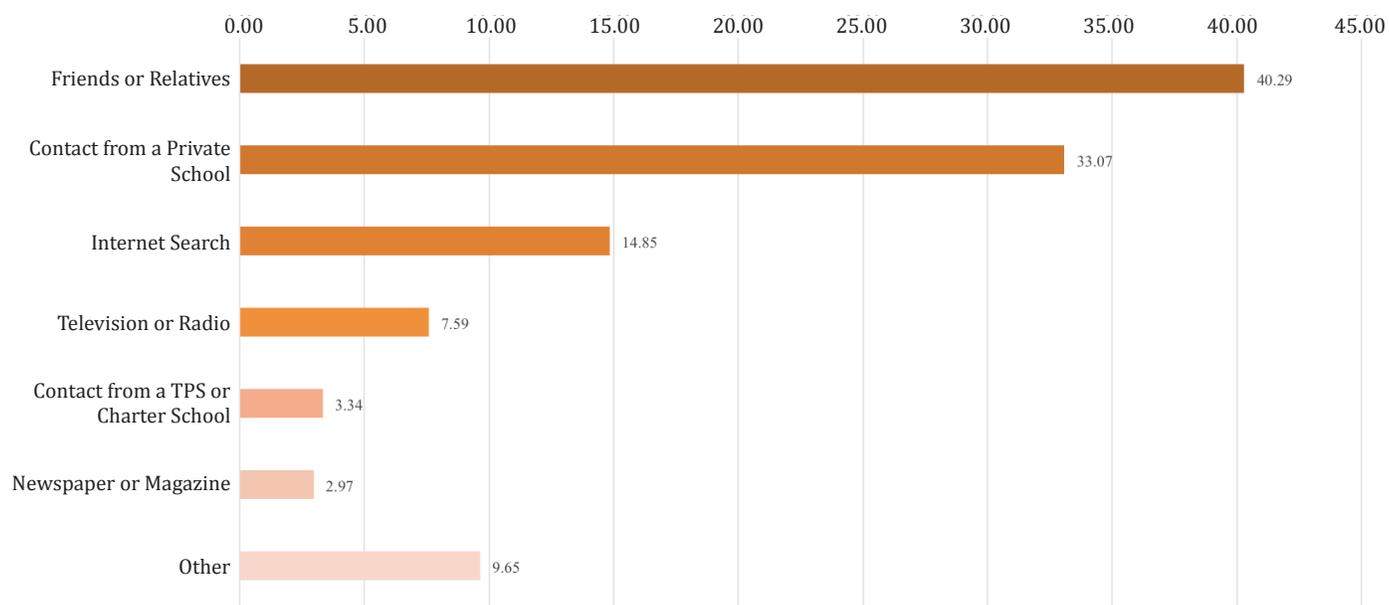
After answering a set of common questions, the survey branched into two paths and respondents were directed to answer specific questions based on their involvement in the Opportunity Scholarship program: Applicants who used the OSP to send their child to a private school (n= 1,791) formed one group, and applicants who did not use the OSP to send their child to a private school (n= 634) formed the other group. When analyzing the data, we break out responses across these two categories where appropriate, to identify differences in responses by use of OSP.

Results

1. How do parents find out about the Opportunity Scholarship Program?

The success of a targeted school choice program like the Opportunity Scholarship program depends on utilization of the program by the intended population. One of the primary concerns, therefore, is ensuring that parents are aware of the program's existence and of their eligibility for it. To learn about information diffusion, we asked parents to share how they learned about the Opportunity Scholarship Program (Figure 1), which revealed the importance of social networks. The majority of parents (40 percent) indicated that they had learned about the program through informal means, primarily from conversations with friends and relatives. Thirty-three percent indicated that they had been contacted about the program by a private school, and 15 percent learned about the program from an internet search. Such searches likely pointed the user towards either news articles related to the program or the website maintained by the state agency that administers the program (NCSEEA), which offers detailed application information and up-to-date program usage statistics on their website (www.ncseea.edu). Several state and national school choice advocacy organizations also offer information about North Carolina's program on their own websites.

Figure 1. Pathways Through Which Parents Learned About the Opportunity Scholarship Program



Note: n = 2,425 respondents; TPS = Traditional Public School

Focus group data revealed similar learning channels. The majority of participants indicated that they initially became aware of the program through word of mouth:

“We did not know anything about the scholarship. I think a friend of ours told us,” Fayetteville Parent (2014).

Another parent commented, *“My daughter’s basketball coach told me about it I think before I saw the billboards and stuff. He was like, ‘Do not forget to get on the computer and do the application on such-and-such date,’”* Fayetteville parent (2014). Upon learning about the program, parents expressed great enthusiasm for participation: *“I wanted to jump all over that if we qualified for it or not.”* Wilson Parent (2014) and described proactive steps they took to learn more about the application process: *“I didn’t even know this program existed until I spoke with [advocacy group staff member]. Somebody had given me her number and that’s how I found out about this Opportunity Scholarship.”* Fayetteville Parent (2016).

The survey also asked parents to share how easy it was to access information about the Opportunity Scholarship program (Table 1). Eighty percent of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it was easy to get the information they needed about the program, and 87 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the application process was simple to complete.

Focus group data shed more light on those parents who struggled with the application process. One parent commented: *“Navigating print was pretty intensive. It was a lot of reading. I was able to*

Table 1. Parent Impressions of the Application Process

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Strongly Disagree
It was easy for me to get the information I needed about the OS	11.39	68.77	6.02	7.93
The application process was simple to complete	28.86	4.57	2.72	5.48

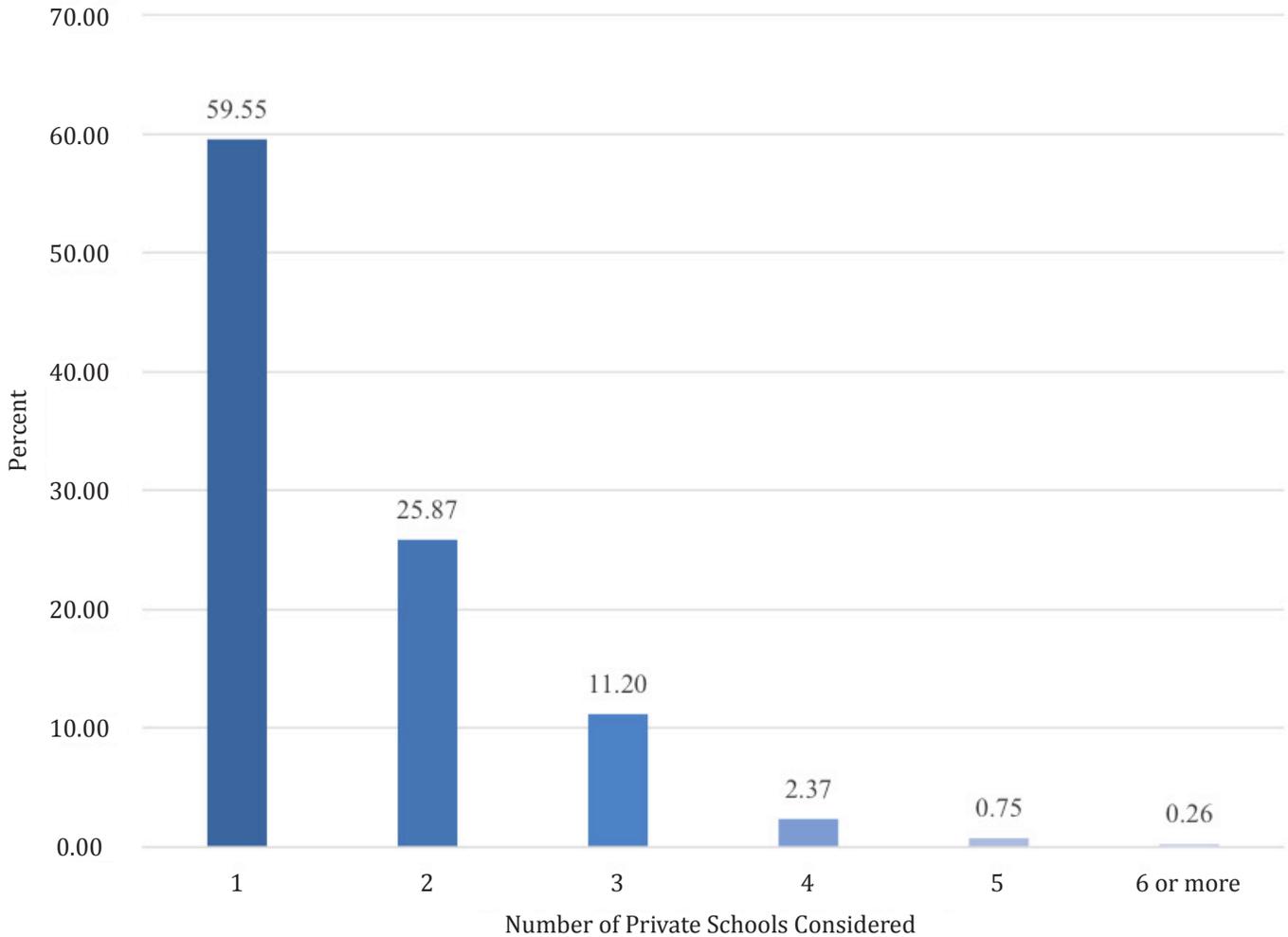
Note: OS= Opportunity Scholarship

understand everything pretty easily, but I could see for people that are not well-versed in how schools work and things like that it could have been frustrating." Wilson Parent (2014). Some indicated that having an advocate or point of contact to guide them through the application process was particularly useful: *"It really helps to have an advocate, you know, someone like [advocacy group staff member] who's very experienced to kind of help people along."* Charlotte, Parent (2016).

We next asked parents about their procedure for finding a private school. The school choice literature suggests that parents become more discerning in their school "shopping" behavior as experience with participating in a school choice program grows.⁵ Those who are inexperienced with exercising school choice may not consider a broad range of schools initially, but grow more sophisticated in their search for a private school over time. It is possible that these national trends are reflected in our data, as the majority of parents indicated that they only considered a single school when choosing which private school their child would attend with the Opportunity Scholarship (Figure 2). This may also be an artifact of the rural nature of many of North Carolina's counties, in which there are often very few private schools (and sometimes only one) from which to choose. Although one-third of the parents surveyed lived in three large urban counties (Cumberland, Wake, and Mecklenburg), the other respondents lived in a variety of urban and rural areas of the state, representing 88 (out of 100) North Carolina counties in total.

⁵See Stewart, T., & Wolf, P. J. (2014). *The School Choice Journey: School Vouchers and the Empowerment of Urban Families*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

Figure 2. Number of Private Schools Considered



Note: n = 2,277 respondents

2. Why don't all applicants use the scholarship, once awarded?

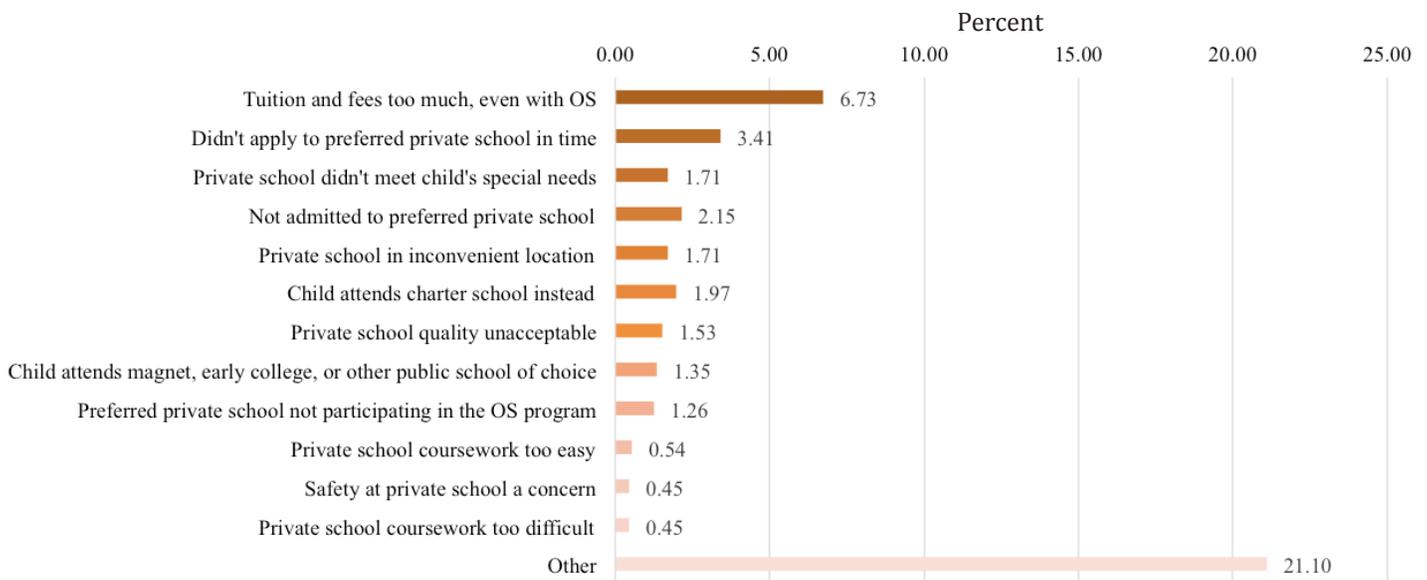
Not all applicants ultimately end up using an Opportunity Scholarship to attend a private school. In our parent survey sample, approximately one-quarter (26 percent) of applicants were non-users. Some of these parents learned after they applied for the program that they did not meet the eligibility criteria to qualify for an Opportunity Scholarship. For instance, their household income did not fall below the eligibility threshold or their child had not attended a traditional public school for 75 days prior to applying for an Opportunity Scholarship.

Open-response items on the parent survey allowed ineligible families to share more insight into their circumstances. One parent wrote, *"Because my son has attended the private school the year prior, we were not eligible. This was very sad for us, because my husband left us and my son has been attending that private school since he was kindergarten and now he's in seventh grade. I needed [the Opportunity Scholarship's] help more than ever."* Another parent explained,

“We qualified last year, but did not qualify this year because our income was too high.” Focus group data suggested at least one way in which the program guidelines themselves might have impacted applicant behavior and choices: *“I do know parents that have taken the chance—even though they didn’t want to, but they thought [of] the benefit in the long run—they put their kids back in public school because they knew that they would qualify. . . . It was for a year, but it would benefit them more by doing so.”* Fayetteville Parent (2016)

Among those who were eligible for the program, however, and were selected through the NCSEEA lottery to receive a voucher, a significant number still chose not to use an Opportunity Scholarship to enroll in a private school. To learn more about this subgroup, we invited them to share their reasons for non-use of an Opportunity Scholarship (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Reasons for Non-Use of an Opportunity Scholarship by Program-Eligible Lottery Winners



Note: n =1,114 parents who had at least one child decline the scholarship, despite winning the application lottery;
OS = Opportunity Scholarship

Parents’ reasons for non-use of an Opportunity Scholarship are diverse, but some patterns stand out.

Unlike the statewide voucher program in Louisiana, for instance, North Carolina’s Opportunity Scholarship Program is among those programs that require parental co-payment of tuition and fees if those costs exceed the value of the voucher.⁶ This program feature ensures that parents maintain

⁶Two other statewide school choice programs that share this design feature are the Indiana Choice Scholarship Program and Florida’s McKay Scholarship Program for students with special needs. The Louisiana Scholarship Program, on the other hand, requires participating private schools to accept the voucher as full payment.

direct financial responsibility for their child's education, but has been criticized by some for pricing low-income parents out of the market. The latter concern is reflected in our data, as the top reason for non-use of a scholarship by parents in this group is that private school tuition and fees cost too much, even after those costs are offset by the Opportunity Scholarship (seven percent).

At three percent, the second most frequently selected reason for non-use of a scholarship by parents in this group was that they did not apply for their preferred private school in time. It seems that many parents were under the impression that it was sufficient to apply for the Opportunity Scholarship from the state, without realizing that they also needed to apply separately for admission to a private school. This type of application error is one that can be addressed as the program grows and the informational materials and webinars offered by NCSEAA continue to stress this program requirement.

It is important to acknowledge that a significant number of parents in this group selected the "other" category (21 percent), which reflects the diversity of family circumstances that can inhibit eligible families from actually exercising school choice. The open-response section of the survey allowed parents to explain their specific reasons for non-use of an Opportunity Scholarship. A representative sample of parent comments is provided below:

We couldn't afford for them to eat breakfast at home then bring their lunches, daily. [S]o we had to send them to public school cause the breakfast and lunches are provided free. Sadly that's the truth.

My daughter [does] receive grant but it [doesn't] cover all her schooling. If I would have know it didn't cover would have never got it. It left her with a balance after all papers and money received from the funding. Single family households have to make up differences and it's hard.

We placed my K in a local private school using the scholarship. We decided not to accept the scholarship for my 4th grader because the private schools that would fit his needs best for upper grades are too expensive even with the scholarship.

I needed to know how much the Scholarship was for before I paid the \$1,000 [private school] registration fee. I need to know if I could afford the balance with the scholarship. I am a single parent and can't afford to waste \$1,000 registration fee for 2 children and then not be able to pay the balance.

There are no Catholic high schools in this area. The one school that we had a true interest was an hour away and tuition was extremely high. We considered a local Christian school, but it was not a good fit for my daughter.

Transportation is a big issue. No busses come pick up or drop off.

To learn more about fallback options, we next asked those parents who applied for but did not end up using an Opportunity Scholarship where their child attended school instead (Table 2). Approximately half (45 percent) of parents said their child attended a private school regardless, by self-financing the tuition and fees or by applying for financial aid from another source, such as a scholarship offered by an individual private school. Approximately one-third (32 percent) of non-users reported that their child attended his or her assigned traditional public school instead and seven percent reported that their child attended a public charter school.

Table 2. *Schools Attended by Applicants Who Don't End Up Using an Opportunity Scholarship*

School Type	Percent
Private school, self-financed or using financial aid from another source	44.93
Assigned traditional public school	31.70
Charter School	6.70
Traditional public school that we chose (e.g., Magnet)	5.56
Other	11.11

Note: n = 612 respondents

3. What are the experiences of parents whose child uses an Opportunity Scholarship?

We asked parents of scholarship users to rate their satisfaction with various characteristics of the private school they selected (Table 3). Satisfaction rates were high across the board. In particular, 71 percent of parents indicated that they were “very satisfied” with school safety. Similarly, 71 percent of parents indicated that they were very satisfied with instruction in character or values. Conversely, only 41 percent of parents indicated that they were very satisfied with racial diversity at their chosen private school.

Table 3. Parent Impressions of the Application Process

	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied	Not Applicable
Safety	71.09	22.21	1.85	0.96	2.87	1.02
Instruction in Character or Values	71.03	21.57	2.11	1.08	3.06	1.15
Teacher Quality	67.64	24.90	2.55	1.15	2.87	0.89
Expectations for Student Achievement	65.86	26.82	2.48	0.89	2.99	0.96
Discipline	59.29	29.10	4.28	1.53	4.02	1.79
Location	52.68	34.44	7.65	1.40	2.81	1.02
Facilities	45.91	38.87	8.95	2.94	2.49	0.83
Racial Diversity	40.52	38.16	12.95	3.45	2.62	2.30

Note: $n = 1,570$ parents of scholarship users

One subgroup we were particularly interested in learning more about was the group of families transferring from the public to the private sector. Although the Opportunity Scholarship program does permit some early elementary students to use an Opportunity Scholarship without first attending a public school (i.e., those entering Kindergarten or first grade), the majority of students who participate in the program switch from a public school into a private school. To gauge parental satisfaction rates among this latter group, we asked them to grade their children's current and previous schools on a scale from A through F (Table 4).

Table 4. Satisfaction Rates of Parents of a Child Who Switched from Public to Private School with an Opportunity Scholarship

Percent Assigning This Grade to:	A	B	C	D	F
Child's Current School	69.15	24.44	5.13	1.03	0.26
Child's Previous School	8.29	18.29	31.28	25.98	16.15

Note: Sample is restricted to parents of those switching from public schools only (i.e., excludes parents of Kindergarten and first grade students who did not previously attend a public school); $n = 1,170$ respondents

Parents appear very satisfied with their children's new school environments, with 69 percent assigning a grade of "A" and 24 percent assigning a grade of "B" to their children's current private schools. Conversely, these parents were more likely to assign a grade of "C" (31 percent) or "D" (26 percent) to their children's previous public schools. It will be helpful to continue tracking parental satisfaction rates over time as initial satisfaction may be partly driven by satisfaction with exercising choice, and not just by perceived quality of the private school selected.

Focus group data were particularly helpful in shedding more light on the specific ways in which parents perceived the private school experience as being different from their public school experience. Parents commented on student engagement, teacher responsiveness, and social connectedness arising from a close-knit school environment:

"That's one of the biggest changes that I've seen in kids from public to private, is that they're inspired. It's not just learning, they don't just attend because they have to. They're engaged and they like it. It fosters creative thought." Fayetteville Parent (2016)

"The teachers respond to e-mails, they do not wait around, they want you involved when the public schools do not want you involved. They want you involved with your child and teachers." Fayetteville Parent (2014).

"It feels like more of a family environment at the school. Everyone is working towards one goal." Fayetteville Parent (2014)

"They treat you like family, which I like." Charlotte Parent (2016).

We also asked parents to comment on any problems at their chosen private school (Table 5). Overwhelmingly, parents indicated that the majority of potential problems we asked them to rate were not applicable. Setting those responses aside momentarily, the problem that private school parents were most likely to rate as "very serious" was students using drugs, selected by 14 percent of parents. Similarly, 14 percent of parents indicated that fighting and student destruction of property were "very serious" problems at their chosen private school.

Table 5. Parents' Rating of the Seriousness of Problems at their Chosen Private School, Opportunity Scholarship Users Only

Variable	Very Serious	Somewhat Serious	Not Serious	Not Applicable
Students Using Drugs	14.45	1.02	44.50	40.03
Students Fighting	14.24	1.66	50.51	33.59
Students Destroying Property	14.00	1.60	47.89	36.51
Students Missing Class	13.69	4.29	52.53	29.49
Racial Conflict	12.52	3.90	50.64	32.95
Lack of Extracurricular Activities	9.01	13.87	51.31	25.81
Students with Different Abilities Put in the Same Classroom	7.81	9.60	55.31	27.27

Notes: $n = 1,566$ respondents; Sample restricted to parents of Opportunity Scholarship users only

To get a sense of the degree and type of communication between parents and schools, we asked parents of scholarship users to report on the frequency with which they have engaged in conversations with a school employee about typical school-related topics (Table 6).

Table 6. Frequency With Which Parents Have Spoken to a School Employee About Various Topics, Opportunity Scholarship Users Only

Variable	5 or More Times	3-4 Times	1-2 Times	None	Not Applicable
This Child's Achievement	21.50	21.88	36.40	16.19	4.03
This Child's Schoolwork or Homework	16.38	15.74	36.66	27.64	3.58
Volunteering to Work in the School	15.03	17.77	38.11	23.98	5.12
Teacher Quality	6.16	6.35	17.33	63.03	7.12
Other Students' Behavior	3.21	3.91	20.14	65.36	7.38
This Child's Behavior	2.37	3.13	20.35	66.15	8.00

Notes: $n = 1,566$ respondents; Sample restricted to parents of Opportunity Scholarship users only

The predominant perception of participating parents is that most of the conversations that private school employees have with parents are focused on academic matters, not behavioral issues. Specifically, 22 percent of parents indicated that they have spoken to someone at their child’s private school about their child’s academic achievement five or more times in the current school year. Conversely, approximately two-thirds of parents indicated that they have never spoken to someone at their child’s private school about behavior issues, either relating to their own child’s behavior (66 percent) or that of other students (65 percent). It is important to bear in mind that this survey was distributed in October 2016, so the window of time during which these conversations could have occurred is limited to about two months.

We turned next to financial considerations. The maximum value of the Opportunity Scholarship is \$4,200 but if private school tuition exceeds this amount, families are responsible for the payment of any additional tuition and fees owed. Thus, to learn more about the actual experiences of parents of scholarship users, we asked them what proportion of their expenses the Opportunity Scholarship covers at their chosen private school (Table 7). The data reveal that the majority of participating parents bear at least some co-payment responsibility. Twenty-one percent of parents indicated that the scholarship covers all of their expenses, whereas two-thirds of parents (67 percent) indicated that the Opportunity Scholarship covers most of their expenses, and 12 percent indicated that the scholarship covered less than half of their expenses. It is important to note, however, that interpretation of this latter figure is restricted because many parents for whom the scholarship would cover less than half of their private school expenses did not accept the scholarship in the first place, and thus are not reflected in this particular subsample.

Table 7. Perceptions of the Value of the Opportunity Scholarship Among Parents of Scholarship Users

At my chosen school(s), the OS covers	Percent
All of my expenses	20.65
Most of my expenses	67.14
Less than half of my expenses	12.22

Note: Sample is restricted to parents of Opportunity Scholarship users only; n = 1,637 respondents

An open-response question allowed parents of scholarship users to elaborate on this topic, which brought two important facts to light. First, it appears that many of the private schools supplement the Opportunity Scholarship award with additional sources of privately-raised financial aid for families in need. It is the combination of both sources of financial aid that permit many families to make the

transfer to private school. It is also worth noting that many parents still end up paying some out-of-pocket expenses, which, may actually happen by design as numerous school leaders we interviewed for a companion report to this one noted a desire to have all parents make a nominal financial commitment. Second, an unanticipated expense that a number of parents reported facing was the cost of feeding their child breakfast and lunch during the school week, as these meals were provided free of charge when their children attended public school.

A sample of representative comments are provided below:

The scholarship amount is NOT adequate enough to cover admissions at most or all private schools. If the school did not give us a sizeable additional scholarship, my daughter would NOT have been able to attend! The award amount is WAY to low, it needs to be doubled.

The Opportunity Scholarship covers half of the tuition but none of the fees for registering, testing, or new family fee. Due to my financial status I qualified for additional assistance from the school because without it I would not have been able to afford even with being given the Opportunity Scholarship.

I make minimum wage, was awarded the full amount of the scholarships, and still have to pay about \$4000/year which is the remainder of the tuition cost, application fees, yearly activity fees and other nonrefundable administrative costs, lunches, and of course the uniforms. There isn't any assistance available for these things. I wish my kids could play sports too but it just costs too much. I go broke for this school but I do it because I feel my kids have a better chance of being successful if they aren't around the distractions of public school. And they learn about our religion which I feel will help build morale.

It does not cover actual cost of schools tuition, but they waive the rest of the fees for us.

The tuition is a little over 11k. The school matched the Opp Scholarship, so between the two, most of the expenses are covered.

more than half but we still struggle making payments each month

Things to consider that are not included are lunch meals are \$4 per day per student, that's \$40 per week for our family of 2 students. Also, application fees, books, etc are not covered and have to be paid in advance. Uniforms that have the school logo are purchased separately as well.

Even though the cost of the school was covered. We had to drive a hour daily, then by them

breakfast, then they had to bring their lunches. we couldn't afford it. the public schools provide their food for free.

To better understand if the Opportunity Scholarship program is easing the transition for parents who were planning to transfer to the private school sector anyway, or, conversely, opening up the possibility of transfer for parents who never would have considered such a move otherwise, we asked parents to respond to the statement, "I would have sent my (child/children) to the school I chose this year even without the Opportunity Scholarship." Their responses are speculative, but they do reveal a general dissatisfaction with the public-school system and a desire to switch sectors, and they also highlight the financial hardships that previously prevented them from switching to a private school.

Many parents in our sample did not believe that returning to public school was a viable option for their child, in terms of ensuring their wellbeing. Several described weighing the possibility of making major lifestyle changes to facilitate a switch to a private school, as well as the ways in which they might have attempted to fund a private school education in the absence of the financial assistance provided by the Opportunity Scholarship program (for example, by leaning on family members for financial support, by taking on extra jobs, or by applying for financial aid directly from a private school). A representative sample of comments is provided below:

I cannot afford to send my children to private school without the opportunity scholarship program. [Even w]ith the scholarship I had to get another job to cover expenses and uniforms, the school requires uniforms from Lands' End but I am forever grateful that my children was chosen for this program.

The quality of the public school was lacking and our son was basically bored the entire year. We planned to move to a smaller house and try to take on additional jobs if possible to ensure he could return to a private school if the Opportunity Scholarship had not been approved.

We do all we can to keep our children in Catholic school as we are Catholics and believe in the importance of their Catholic/faith-based education. Without the Opportunity scholarship, we would depend even more heavily on tuition assistance.

My child has sp needs. Class size is imperative. Had my brother not be willing/able to off-set the balance I might have had to reconsider.

My husband and I would have taken on extra jobs or asked our family to help us pay the tuition. Our children's education is very important to us as well as their safety.

4. What are the push factors that parents cite as reasons for wanting to leave their child’s previous public school?

In order to better understand parents’ motivation for leaving the public school system, we asked them to share their reasons (Table 8). The most common reason selected was school quality, selected by approximately one-third of parents (35 percent). Concerns about school safety were also prevalent, selected by one-quarter of parents (26 percent).

Table 8. Parents’ Reasons for Leaving the Public School System

Reason	Percent
Quality of previous school was unacceptable	35.29
Concerned about school safety	25.52
Child was not comfortable at previous school	20.55
Wanted all children to be in same school	14.13
Coursework too easy	10.72
Previous school was in an inconvenient location	3.80
Coursework too difficult	2.35
Child suspended or expelled	0.61
Previous school didn’t meet child’s special needs	0.06
Other	35.57

Note: n = 1,791 respondents

The perception of unacceptable public school quality was also prevalent in open-response comments. One parent explained, *“My son was in AIG [an academically and intellectually gifted program]. I felt as though the school was not challenging my son’s academic skills.”* A second parent commented, *“My son needed to be challenged and he needed the structure that the private school offered”* and another parent noted, *“The school was not giving my son a real challenge. He would finish his whole week’s work in two days and got always in trouble for shouting out all the answers.”*

Among those selecting the 'Other' category, open-response comments indicated the appeal of a faith-based education. For instance, one parent commented, ***"I wanted a school that would meet his needs and teach him about God."*** Many parents also raised issues about their child being bullied in the public-school system, and shared their desire for smaller class sizes so that their child could receive more one-on-one attention.

I could not afford to send her without the help of the scholarship. Since receiving the scholarship, she has excelled in the private school due to no bullying and smaller class sizes. This scholarship has enabled her to learn in a safe and supportive environment and she is flourishing now. This scholarship saved her education and she now loves school and the learning process. I'm thankful it became available to her and I can't say enough great things about the opportunity this scholarship has provided her and the way it has improved her life.

Many of these same themes were prevalent in the focus groups. The most common reasons cited for changing schools were dissatisfaction with school quality and teacher performance, having a child who needed special attention, and a desire to find an environment that better reflected a family's values. Some parents changed schools because they felt their children needed closer attention than the public school provided: ***"We needed her to be in a smaller class environment so going to a private school would give her that small one-on-one attention,"*** Charlotte Parent (2016). Another parent shared that her motivation was a desire to prevent her child from encountering certain experiences that were not age-appropriate: ***"I do not want them to be totally sheltered, but the kids in the public schools were way more advanced [socially],"*** Fayetteville Parent (2016). The majority of focus group participants, however, felt that their child's previous public school did not meet their personal standards:

"[M]y concern was that they knew she was below where she needed to be and they were encouraging me to send her to the 2nd grade knowing that she wasn't doing well in the 1st grade and that's when I made the decision that something needed to change." Charlotte Parent (2016)

"The teacher, obviously, has done the best they know how to do, might not have had the greatest training but they're doing the best they know how to do, but it's just not enough." Fayetteville Parent (2016)

"[My daughter] had to leave that school. You know, they got a new principal, [but that d]idn't change a lot real quick... And like I said, who's accountable? I am, I'm a parent. So, I can't let my child stay in an environment where I know she's not learning anything." Fayetteville Parent (2016)

5. What are the pull factors that parents cite as reasons for switching their child into a private school?

We next asked parents to share some insight into their school selection priorities by inviting them to share their impression of the importance of various school characteristics when selecting a private school (Table 9).

Table 9. Parent Ratings of the Importance of Various School Characteristics

Characteristic	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Educational quality of the school	93.96	5.76	0.19	0.09
Safety	92.62	6.45	0.75	0.19
Teacher quality	91.17	8.32	0.23	0.28
Leadership	76.84	21.10	2.02	0.05
Class size	70.52	23.82	4.82	0.84
Financial considerations	69.37	26.71	3.50	0.42
Discipline	64.57	29.23	5.32	0.89
Religious education	63.95	20.96	8.58	6.52
School facilities (library, gym, textbooks, etc.)	50.40	37.00	10.91	1.69
Special programs offered by the school	46.61	34.42	15.09	3.88
Other children in the family attending the same school	44.67	20.02	12.72	22.59
School location	44.62	33.47	19.21	2.70
School size	42.33	33.32	17.41	6.95
Racial diversity	38.39	30.71	18.12	12.78
Extracurricular activities	32.90	39.60	21.84	5.67

n = 2,145 respondents

The most important school characteristic cited by parents is the educational quality of the school, selected as “very important” by 94 percent of parents. In close second place was school safety (selected by 93 percent), followed by teacher quality (selected by 91 percent). It is worth noting that the opportunity to participate in any of the state’s public school choice options (such as attending a charter school, magnet school, or early college, or transferring to a traditional public school by way of an inter-district or intra-district enrolment option) also would allow parents to select schools based on these three characteristics. What distinguishes a private school choice program such as the Opportunity Scholarship program, however, is the ability to choose a religious education. Indeed, 64 percent of parents note this characteristic as very important to them.

One characteristic stands out for having the highest proportion of parents rate it as “Not important.” Twenty-three percent of parents indicated that having other children in the family attending the same school was not an important consideration for them. This response may shed light on the value parents place on school and teacher quality over convenience, which is especially noteworthy considering that most private schools do not provide transportation—an additional cost for families who participate in the program.

Conclusion

Key Themes

Parents referenced the importance of their social networks for learning about the Opportunity Scholarship program and for navigating the application process. However, once their application had been accepted, not all parents actually ended up taking advantage of the Opportunity Scholarship. A large number of these families turned out to be ineligible, either because their family income did not fall below the threshold established by the program or because their child had not attended a public school prior to applying to the program. Among eligible families, parents cited diverse reasons for declining an Opportunity Scholarship, with the majority of those parents indicating that they would have been responsible for a greater degree of co-payment for private school expenses than they were willing or able to pay. Notably, parents also cited unexpected hidden costs such as school transportation and meals (breakfast and lunch), and for some parents, these costs represent barriers to participation.

In many cases, parents who accepted the voucher described ways in which the private schools help them to supplement the value of the voucher by providing them with additional financial aid to be used towards tuition and fees.

Parents of Opportunity Scholarship users appear to be very satisfied with their child's new school environment, with 94 percent assigning a grade of "A" or "B" to their child's current private school. In particular, parents expressed satisfaction with school safety and with the instruction their child receives in character or values. Conversely, only 41 percent of parents indicated that they were very satisfied with racial diversity at their chosen private school.

In terms of push factors that motivated the transfer from the public to the private sector, the most common reason cited for wanting to leave the public school system was school quality. Concerns about school safety were also prevalent.

In terms of pull factors that made the private school sector more appealing, the vast majority of parents referenced educational quality as a very important consideration.

Limitations

Because this survey was administered online, we can assume that the respondents had access to the internet and were comfortable with using a computer, cell phone, iPad, or other technology. To maximize the number of respondents, we did optimize the format of the parent survey during

the design phase so that parents answering on a mobile device would have a positive experience. Nonetheless, the conclusions presented here might look very different if our sample included additional respondents with limited internet access or poor technological proficiency.

We also wish to acknowledge that non-native English speakers may be poorly represented in our sample as the survey was only available in English and focus groups were only offered in English. This language barrier may be a significant concern if it also prevents eligible families from applying for an Opportunity Scholarship in the first place, as the application materials are only available in English. Future research focused on the access issues faced by this subgroup could be a fruitful avenue for investigation.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that many of the responses represent personal perceptions at the time the survey was taken and therefore are not necessarily reflective of objectively verifiable conditions or circumstances. Each of these limitations is typical of survey-based research, however, and we do not believe they significantly detract from the value of the information gained.

Future Research

Many questions remain about the impacts of the Opportunity Scholarship Program and the experiences and perceptions of various groups that are affiliated with North Carolina's private school voucher program. For instance, this survey revealed that 60 percent of parents only considered a single private school and 26 percent considered two private schools when choosing a private school to send their child to with an Opportunity Scholarship. This may be a result of the rural nature of many of North Carolina's counties, where there is not a broad selection of private schools to begin with, but it may also reflect parents' inexperience with exercising school choice. It will be important to track trends in this outcome over time to see if parents report deliberating between a broader number of private schools as their experience and proficiency with exercising school choice grows.

It is also important to examine how students are affected by this program, which will require an academic impact analysis and a competitive effects analysis. How does the achievement of participating and non-participating students change as a result of the program? Finally, what is the fiscal impact of the program? These questions and more represent fruitful avenues for future research.

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